# RESPECTABLE FROM THEIR INTELLIGENCE: THE EDUCATION OF LOUISIANA'S GENS DE COULEUR LIBRES, 1800 TO 1860

BY

ALISHA D. JOHNSON

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Policy Studies
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2017

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Christopher Span, Chair
Professor James D. Anderson
Associate Professor Yoon Pak
Professor Nancy Beadie, University of Washington
Associate Professor Katrina Sanders, University of Iowa

## ABSTRACT

This study provides a historical analysis of the socioeconomic and cultural conditions that influenced the unprecedented educational attainment of Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* (free people of color) from colonization to the dawn of the American Civil War. Many in this community came to possess notable wealth – to the extent that they have been esteemed as the wealthiest group of free blacks in the nation in the nineteenth century. Moreover, *libres* were able to attain the highest levels of education: private schools were created, pupils were sent north for schooling, tutors were hired, and many finished their schooling in France. Given that this community, on the whole, achieved substantially higher levels of wealth and education than any of their North American counterparts, this work relies on archival research methods to answer the central question: *What enabled an entire community of color to find scholarly success in an overtly racially oppressive society?*

In this work I argue that Louisiana's French and Spanish civil and cultural norms created a space for the high economic and educational attainment of the region's community of color. Consequently, the social, civil, and economic liberties enjoyed by this community allowed them to participate in occupations in which skill and knowledge could be exercised, perpetuating further need, means, and desire for education. And yet, the societal norms that created a space of opportunity for Louisiana's *libres* were not sufficient to overcome the inferior status to which this community was ultimately consigned. Regardless of this community's evident achievements, by the dawn of the Civil War the narrative of black deficiency had grown to such a volume that it rendered *libres*' story inaudible.

Even as the circumstances surrounding Louisiana's antebellum *gens de couleur libres* were exceptional, their experience as people of color enriches the larger narrative of black education. This case complicates perceptions of achievement along racial lines by challenging the understanding that all black educational achievement in the antebellum South was impeded by whites. At the same time, it illustrates an important coincidence of autonomy and aspiration that ultimately resulted in significant and widespread educational attainment within this community of color.

*For William T. and Thelma Johnson.*

*In following your hearts, you've enabled me to follow mine.*

*and*

*For Orlandis. You should be here.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank the National Academy of Education and the Spencer Foundation for seeing the value in this inquiry, for the mentorship they have provided, and for supporting me in the completion of this work. I also must thank my committee, who offered their encouragement and aided me in carrying this project from idea to reality.

I would be remiss not to specifically thank those who, despite having no formal role in this process, must be credited with inspiring me onward. Michelle Purdy, Jon Hale, Denice Hood, John Bell, Ronald Butchart, Joy Williamson-Lott. You've read and challenged my work, you've encouraged me, and you've offered me your guidance and friendship. Most importantly, you have seen me as the person and scholar I aspire to be, and you have helped me to keep progressing toward that end. You all have enriched this journey and brought me joy – I'm not sure what I would have done without you.

To my other dear friends – those that I left in Portland, and the select few that I have met along the way – you have been my sanity. When I forget myself you consistently remind me who I am and what I am here for. Your friendship has been the greatest gift, sustaining me through many challenges. Annie, Lea, Ursula, Kristin, Aliza, Sarah, Theo – Thank You.

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## Introduction – Between the Encampments

*…between the fortified encampments of the colonizers and the quarters of the colonized there were other locations. These in-between locations represent… opportunities for greater insight into the opposed worlds that enclosed them. There, the double-consciousness required by the everyday work of translation offered a prototype for the ethically charged role of the interpreter.*[1]

~ Paul Gilroy ~

Early in the nineteenth century New Orleans transplant Benjamin Latrobe took to his journal to catalogue his experiences and impressions of his new home. Latrobe expressed that "the state of society at any time here is puzzling," explaining that, "There are, in fact, three societies here – first the French, second the American, third, the mixed." (169). It is with the free people of color who, throughout the antebellum period existed in this third community, whose lives were defined by the opposed worlds of servitude and whiteness between which they existed, that this study is concerned.

This inquiry began very simply with the revelation that, "in the decades before the Civil War, New Orleans had… two full-fledged symphony orchestras; one white and one Creole."[2] The

[1] Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 71.

[2] Geoffrey Ward, *JAZZ: A Film by Ken Burns*, directed by Ken Burns. (2000; General Motors), film. Note: Historical documents and, consequently, historians use various terms to describe persons of Color in Louisiana during this time period; including Black, Negro, Creole, Creole of Color, Mulatto, Quadroon (one quarter Black), Octoroon (one eighth Black), and Griffe (Mulatto or Black mixed with Native American). Pinning down one term proves problematic as terms like *Creole* at times refer to people of French and Spanish lineage without any African blood, and at other times refers distinctly to those of mixed African and French or Spanish background. *Mulatto* serves to designate all persons of mixed White and African lineage, however this term then excludes those of

mere existence of a symphony signaled that members of Louisiana's community of color were learned beyond rudimentary literacy. *Gens de couleur libres* were people of color who were the free mixed-blood, French-speaking descendants of African and French parentage, as well as people of color with Latin blood, and various other free blacks. This work details the historically situated social, economic, and cultural conditions that influenced the unprecedented educational attainment of this community from colonization to the dawn of the American Civil War. This is the story of a community that, for over a century, experienced exceptional civil protection, economic autonomy, and reaped the benefits of relatively moderate social norms. In fact, Louisiana's *gens de couleur* came to amass such wealth that historian Loren Schweninger esteemed this community, who at the time collectively possessed over $1.8 million worth of land and claimed 24 percent of the property owned by blacks in the entire South, as the wealthiest group of free blacks in the nation during the nineteenth century.[3] The children of the most affluent families of this community were educated in a manner agreeable to their privileged station: private schools were created, pupils were sent north for schooling, tutors were hired, and many felt that an education consistent

unmixed blood; and *Creole of Color* proves even more exclusive. Historically, *Negro,* and *black* have served to designate anyone who contains even a fraction of African ancestry, however, these terms do not serve to accurately characterize the unique and heavily mixed-race demographic in Louisiana during this time period.

In order to encompass the diverse backgrounds, and in an effort not to exclude those not of the group typically characterized as fair-skinned Creoles of Color in the region at this time, when discussing a free person or group of free people of color within this region I will refer to them as *gens de couleur libres* (free people of color), or *libres.* In instances in which the literature or historical documentation has used some other identifying designation I will use that terminology. The term *creole* is used only to denote a person native to the region, irrespective of race. When discussing people or groups of color outside of this region I will use the term *black*, or people of color unless some other designation is significant.

[3] Loren Schweninger, "Socioeconomic Dynamics among the Gulf Creole Populations: The Antebellum and Civil War Years," in *Creoles of Color of the Gulf South*, ed. James H. Dormon (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 55. Various sources have placed the wealth of this community anywhere from Schweninger's figure to upwards of $22 million. John Blassingame's catalogue of the wealth of households of color claiming at least $200 in property puts the wealth of roughly the top 14% of the community at over $2 million. John W. Blassingame collection, 1831-1879, "Persons of Color who Possessed $200 or More in Property, 1850," Amistad Research Center (hereafter cited as Blassingame Census). See Robert C. Reinders, "The Free Negro in the New Orleans Economy, 1850-1860," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* (*LHQ*) 6 (1965): 273-285.

with their status could only be acquired through travel to France for schooling.[4] At the same time, community members of lesser means were also afforded multiple opportunities for formal instruction, resulting substantial literacy attainment across the community of color.

Given that this community achieved higher levels of wealth and education than most of their North American counterparts, this work broadly seeks to understand the particular educational achievements of this community of color during this period of overt racial oppression, as well as the sociocultural and civil conditions that made such achievement possible. I contend that Louisiana's French and Spanish colonial origins influenced the ways in which race was perceived, constructed, and perpetuated. Like their Saint-Dominguan counterparts, Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* held a place of privilege in a three-tiered social structure that placed whites at the top, slaves at the bottom, and free people of color in the middle. The social norms and legal structures that came to define the liberal space in which *libres* existed enable them to act on behalf of their own aspirations. These conditions consequently created a space for comparably generous educational opportunity.[5] By the 1850s, however, regional changes in demography, and attendant shifts in cultural and civil norms, began to eat away at the freedoms and opportunities available to this community.

While on its face the scope of this study is ambitious, recognition of the early introduction

[4] Laura Foner, "The Free People of Color in Louisiana and St. Domingue: A Comparative Portrait of Two Three-Caste Slave Societies," *Journal of Social History* 3, no. 4 (1970), 407. John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 11; Carl Brasseaux, "Creoles of Color in Louisiana's Bayou Country" in *Creoles of Color of the Gulf South*, ed. James H. Dormon (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996); Harold E. Sterkx, *The Free Negro in Ante-Bellum Louisiana* (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1972); Charles Barthelemy Roussève, *The Negro in Louisiana* (New Orleans: The Xavier University Press, 1937); Nathan Willey, "Education of the Colored People of Louisiana," *Harpers*, July 1866.

[5] I use the word "liberal" in this work not in a political sense, but in a spatial (both literal and conceptual) sense. Liberal here means liberated, or freed from inhibiting interference. It signifies a space of loosened restraint, of liberated movement. In reference to other communities of color during this time, it also presents a measure of comparison. Hence, it does not indicate an absence of racialization or degradation on the basis of race, but a comparably greater realm of movement and action in the face of such racialization.

of, and long-enduring educational opportunities enjoyed by, this community is essential to understanding the significance of this case. *Gens de couleur libres* neither appeared in Louisiana as a fully formed, learned community, nor did their decline occur in one defining moment. Instead, early opportunity was gradually parlayed into further privilege and liberty, which peaked in the early nineteenth century, making 1800 to the dawn of the American Civil War the focal point of this account.

## Existing Literature

Contextualized within the long narrative of black education history, the story of Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* provides an alternate frame of reference by which to view black educational attainment. Beginning with W.E.B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson, accounts of black education have necessarily focused on the oft-stalled progress of formal schooling for people of color.[6] In 1915 Carter G. Woodson engaged the subject of black education with a nationally focused, pre-Civil War study. His goal was to fill the gap in scholarship with, "the accounts of the successful strivings of Negros for enlightenment under most adverse circumstances;" accounts that, "read like beautiful romances of a people in a historic age."[7] The lyrical quality of Woodson's description highlighted one way that we have come to historically understand black education, as an engaging drama imbued with hope. By 1933, in his work aptly titled *Mis-Education of the Negro*, Woodson came to point out the dominant narrative under which the black community has been compelled to operate, a story of communities stripped of agency:

Unlike other people, then, the Negro, according to this point of view, was an

[6] Carter G. Woodson, *Education of the Negro Prior to 1861 − A History of the Education of the Colored People of the United States from the Beginning of Slavery to the Civil War* (1919; Reprint, Project Gutenberg, 2004); W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in American 1860-1880*, ed. David L. Levering Lewis (Reprint; 1935, New York: The Free Press, 1998).
[7] Woodson, *Education of the Negro*, author's preface.

> exception to the natural plan of things, and he had no such mission as that of an outstanding contribution to culture. The status of the Negro, then, was justly fixed as that of an inferior…. Negroes have no control over their education and have little voice in their other affairs pertaining thereto.[8]

Woodson's assessment highlights two narratives of black education, degradation and the subsequent silencing of those degraded communities, storylines which have borne out across multiple locations and circumstances in the South and the North. For scholars of color like Woodson, it did not take historical hindsight to recognize the constant interference in and obstruction of black education that ultimately rendered perceptions of black deficiency a visible reality.

Increasingly, scholars like Mary Niall Mitchell, Christopher M. Span, and Heather Andrea Williams have worked to illuminate the early realities behind apparent deficiency of black education. Through a careful reckoning with the evidence, they have re-considered educational opportunity in terms of structural inequality, controlling outside intervention, and the damaging influences that these have had on the black community's educational advancement.[9] For instance, James D. Anderson's analysis of formal schooling for southern blacks after the Civil War illuminates how white philanthropists sought to prepare blacks for "Negro jobs" that keep them from competing with southern whites. Moreover, Anderson has revealed how black communities faced double taxation as they strove for adequate places of learning for their children. Hence, he emphasizes that in order to understand American educational history it is crucial to, "recognize

[8] Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 19-20.
[9] James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Christopher M. Span, *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse: African American Education in Mississippi, 1862-1875* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Hilary J. Moss, *Schooling Citizens: The Struggle for African American Education in Antebellum America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009); Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

that within American democracy there have been classes of oppressed people and that there have been essential relationships between popular education and the politics of oppression. Both schooling for democratic citizenship and schooling for second-class citizenship have been basic traditions in American education." Echoing Anderson, historian Ronald Butchart has neatly summarized, "Indeed, the efforts of whites in black schools from the dawn of freedom into Reconstruction were often equivocal and contradictory to the best interests of a truly free people."[10]

Accordingly, Hilary Moss, Leonard P. Curry, and others have aptly underscored how antebellum free communities of color have circumnavigated myriad obstacles in their quest for literacy and schools.[11] While some whites worked to support blacks' consistent efforts to establish their own schools, historians have found that white involvement did not necessarily indicate a belief that blacks ought to receive instruction commensurate with that of whites; education need only be granted to the extent of blacks' ostensibly limited capacities. For instance, in 1827 a group of New Haven whites founded the African Improvement Society, which sponsored a day school, evening school, and library, among other institutions, for the black community. According to Moss, "its founders believed it was their duty to uplift people of color, but doubted their moral and mental capacity."[12] Further, scholars like Moss and Ira Berlin have illuminated the reality that these obstacles faced people of color across the North as well as the South. Curry has cited how

[10] Anderson, *Education of Blacks*, 215-217, 1. Black families paid taxes that supported public schools, while financial neglect from white school boards compelled them to reach again into their own meager resources to directly support their schools: "The average negro rural schoolhouse is really a disgrace to an independent civilized people… these schoolhouses, though mute, would tell in unmistaken terms a story of injustice, inhumanity and neglect on the part of our white people," quoted in Anderson, 183. Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 3.

[11] Hilary Moss, *Schooling Citizens: The struggle for African American education in antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

[12] Moss, *Schooling Citizens*, 21.

those who taught in northern black schools were paid less than teachers in white schools, and "their qualifications were less carefully scrutinized," to the frustration of black community members.[13] As Ira Berlin has aptly stated the Northern case: "Whites did not need to invent a theory of innate inferiority to show why many free Negroes were poor, shiftless, and criminal. Cut off from education, deprived of many of the possibilities for economic advancement, and denied recognition by the larger society, they naturally fell to the base of the social order."[14]

In general, scholars have made evident the ways in which education for the black community has been scraped out of hardship and negotiated around countless obstacles. The historical prevalence of hindering interference in black education has overshadowed the seemingly few cases in which education for those on the margins has thrived. Directly challenging the ultimate conclusion of inherent black deficiency, Vanessa Siddle Walker summarized the persistent educational struggle for black communities:

> Indeed, the meager materials, the inadequate facilities, the unequal funding of schools and teachers… and the failure of school boards to respond to black parents' requests are so commonly named in most descriptions of segregated education that they have created a national memory…. In this national memory, southern African Americans were victims of whites who questioned the utility of providing blacks anything more than a rudimentary education.[15]

By the dawn of desegregation, white interference had so consistently disappointed black educational efforts that accounts of black initiative and achievement had been rendered marginal

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[13] Curry, *Free Black*, 169. See also Robert J. Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees: Providence's Black Community in the Antebellum Era* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982).
[14] Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: The New Press, 1974), 186.
[15] Walker, *Highest Potential*, 1. Also see Michele Foster, *Black Teachers on Teaching* (New York: The Free Press, 1997); Linda M. Perkins, "The Racial Integration of the Seven Sisters Colleges," *The Journal of Black Higher Education*, no. 19 (1998).

if not entirely invisible in the broader historical narrative. For good reason, the prevailing story of black education is a narrative of adversity; a tale of scholarly knowledge obtained in spite of impediments.

Therefore, integrating cases that illustrate the flourishing of people of color into the broader narrative, as that of Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres*, is important. These accounts are significant, in part, because the persistent evidentiary gap between black educational aspiration and black educational attainment has left us with a past disconnected from the present. We have come to consider the *Brown* decision as the definitive remediation of old wrongs, laying all responsibility for black thriving at the schoolhouse door, and allowing us to discount the enduring and complicated relationship between school and society. Moreover, stories of lasting black educational achievement have been treated as anomalous and, thereby, muted. Such silencing leaves us with little beyond theoretical "ifs" for constructing a way forward in this realm. In addition, the marginalization of such cases has limited the ways that we are able to talk about black achievement as the narrative has been constructed from a reactive position. That is, in adeptly and systematically deconstructing a centuries-old deficit paradigm, scholars have been discursively bound to addressing those factors which have *impeded* success in this realm. These challenges notwithstanding, this body of work has been essential to our understanding of black educational attainment. Laying bare the persistent suppression of black initiative, scholars have leveled a stronger ground upon which we can construct a new understanding about black educational achievement. It is upon this foundation that Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* provide an instructive case in which a community of color was able to succeed in a racially oppressive domain.

Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* in particular have been well studied by their

contemporaries and historians alike.[16] Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's study of the role that Africans played in shaping early Louisiana society illustrates how slaves brought with them essential skills, such as farming, metalworking, and shipbuilding, instrumental to the survival of white officers and adventurers.[17] Hall explains how conditions in Louisiana established racial difference on different footing than in other colonies. "In early New Orleans," she asserts, "being black did not necessarily mean being a slave. Nor was whiteness associated with prestige and power. The first Africans arrived simultaneously with the rejects of French society." Hall has demonstrated the unsettled nature of racial definition in the region as she exhibits how Spanish census takers regularly incorporated people of color into the white population. Moreover, Lauren Schweninger, Jennifer Spear, Gary B. Mills, and others have detailed the interracial relations that left many mixed-race children with ample bequests.[18] In her detailed account of the origins and familial circumstances that produced Louisiana's free community of color, historian Emily Clark has illustrated the great lengths that some white fathers went to circumvent succession laws and ensure the financial security of their progeny.[19] The regularity of such accounts and supporting evidence leave little doubt as to the privileged economic and social status attained by a noteworthy number of *gens de couleur libres*.

This privilege proved more than the benefit of an economic foothold. Clearly, early Louisiana's racial fluidity is a challenging aspect of this study as some evidence reaffirms our

[16] Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*; Sterkx, *Free Negro*; Gary B. Mills, *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977).
[17] Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 133.
[18] Midlo Hall, *Africans*, 130, 238-240; Schweninger, "Socioeconomic Dynamics;" Jennifer Spear, "Using the Faculties Conceded to Her: Slavery, Law, and Agency in Spanish New Orleans," in *Signposts: New Directions in Southern Legal History*, ed. Sally E. Hadden and Patricia Hagler Minter, 65-88 (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2013); Mills, *Forgotten People.*
[19] Emily Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

expectation of differentiation and privilege in scales of whiteness. Yet, many historical materials also confound those expectations. Racial designations were nuanced in southern Louisiana during this era. The fluid and multifarious racial attributions for persons of color within this society greatly complicate our contemporary understanding about *gens de couleur libres* as people of color. Scholars such as Mary Niall Mitchell have examined the ways that visible phenotypical markers, such as light versus dark skin tone, created and reinforced a perceived distance between mixed-race free persons of color, free blacks, and slaves.[20] This study finds, in fact, that the relationship between racial mixture and economic status in antebellum Louisiana was perplexingly inconsistent. Louisiana's community of color was phenotypically and economically diverse, and networks across this community did not always strictly follow along economic lines or degrees of whiteness.

Relative silence in the historical record on the part of the community of color has worked as justification for their silencing; however, some historians have approached the evidence with the intensified scrutiny and greater contextual understanding. For instance, with careful reading of historical data, Emily Clark has provided a more nuanced account of intra-racial relations within Louisiana's community of color. She has shown how the seeming preference of free women of color for white men was likely greatly dictated by demographic necessity, not a desire to bear lighter children. Clark holds that those women who bound themselves to white men to better their social and financial lot were largely of the disadvantaged population of immigrant *femmes de couleur* from Saint-Domingue and Cuba.[21] Further, many creole women of color who did take up with white partners maintained relationships that endured for decades, even until death. Given the

[20] Mary Niall Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future After Slavery* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Clark, *Strange History*.
[21] Clark, *Strange History*, 60-61.

evidence, Clark surmises that "hierarchies of race and phenotype preoccupied Europeans more than they did the men and women upon whom they were inscribed."[22] This new evidence is important to this study as it signals a growing reassessment of the characterization of this community as self-consciously aspiring to whiteness in appearance and manner.

*Gens de couleur libres*' extensively documented wealth and status contradicts the historically paternal characterization of people of color as a "child race."[23] However, although much attention has been paid to this community's achievements, little consideration has been given to the mutually-reinforcing relationship between the economic autonomy, civil agency, and high educational attainment of Louisiana's *gens de couleur*. Moreover, this educational attainment has been treated as an anomalous footnote in the broader history of black American education. This has been partially due to insufficient knowledge about the many spaces for formal instruction available to these students. The aim of his work is to shed light on the societal context and to comprehensively explore the subsequent educational opportunities enjoyed by Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres*. The objective here, moreover, is to meaningfully positon this case within the larger narrative of black education in particular and educational opportunity in general.

## Method

As historian John Lewis Gaddis holds, "imagination in history then, as in science, must be tethered to and disciplined by sources."[24] This work is grounded in archival methods with a focus on primary sources. Relying on a diverse collection of evidence, repositories consulted include

[22] Ibid., 81-82.
[23] "We must recognize in all its relations that momentous fact that the negro is a child race, at least two-thousand years behind the Anglo-Saxon in its development," President of the University of Tennessee, Charles W. Dabney, quoted in Anderson, *Education of Blacks*, 85.
[24] John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 43.

The Historic New Orleans Collection (HNOC), Louisiana State University's Hill Memorial Library, the New Orleans Public Library, and Tulane University's Amistad Research Center, as well as the archives of the Sisters of Mount Carmel, and the Archdiocese of New Orleans archives. Evidentiary sources include census data, manumission records, newspapers, and apprenticeship agreements. These sources have yielded evidence about the dexterity with which Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* navigated, and were at liberty to navigate, civil structures and use these systems to their advantage. Specifically, the expansive collection of personal and business correspondence provide for a more cohesive picture of *libres*' daily lives, economic movements, and values. Manumission petitions, succession records, journals, and accounts of contemporaries indicate that, while eyed with suspicion by many in the white community, *gens de couleur libres* were also viewed with respect and humanity by a number of influential whites. Additionally, these materials provide a richer picture of relationships within the community of color and the ways in which *libres* defined their place within the community. Further, newspapers provide evidence of multiple spaces for formal schooling available to many of Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres*. Importantly, these diverse sources tighten the net of validity by corroborating names, events, and popular feeling.

Notably, materials found in the combined Free People of Color collection (a digitized collaboration between several prominent Louisiana repositories) have been essential to this work. Personally visiting historical venues is essential to getting at the nuance of cultural and spatial context for any particular case; however, access is a concern that yet determines the course of historical analysis. The richness and breadth of this collaborative project promises to open up greater inquiry regarding Louisiana's community of color. At the same time, the wealth of evidence now available adds qualitative depth to our current understanding about this community

as myriad sources serve in clarifying and corroborating both secondary and primary accounts.

While the footsteps of scholars who have entered these archives before are clear, the educational lens which I bring to this work has allowed me to regard already utilized sources under new light. Seeking to understand the comprehensive education of this particular community has led me to explore data attentive to the intersections between race, class, and culture. For instance, the role of the Catholic Church in the education of girls of color tells us about more than the Catholic Church and schooling; it meaningfully illustrates the convergence of law and culture that, early on, helped normalize the education of people of color within this space.[25] Moreover, time spent learning French translation has been invaluable to my ability to do this work as, in keeping with the heritage of this community, many records are documented in French. Even as a number of printed records have been translated, a significant number of qualitatively rich sources have not. For instance, the writings of Jean Boze, overseer for an absentee plantation owner, offer an unfiltered, honest depiction of the rhythms of everyday life in and around New Orleans. Boze's engagement with actors' routine movements across the broader community add context to, and reveal the significance of, numerous other records. Likewise, records such as passports prove Boze a reliable witness as they corroborate his accounts. Further, French-language accounts illuminate the resentment that those of French heritage felt for an increasing population of English speaking Americans and slaves.[26] Such materials remain inaccessible without the ability to translate the at times hurried script of such French-speaking residents, notaries, and government representatives.

[25] Culture can be a problematic concept made to support varied, often conflicting, theoretical baggage. I intend "culture" to signify language, customs, and beliefs. Further, I conceptualize culture as a lived activity – as ways of being and thinking that are shaped by, and shape, norms and. Here culture describes habitual community action, which reveal to us something about community values.

[26] In an 1835 bulletin Jean Boze expressed the common sentiment regarding increasing English influence in the region; "In 1809 there was peace among families and in society but Americans have brought all kinds of death in their wake." *St Gème Family Papers*, f. 258, p. 9-10, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection (HNOC).

Taken altogether, the diversity of these materials is important as they reveal *relationships* between Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres*, slaves, whites with whom they associated, and outsiders traveling through the region. Their differing perspectives tell us something about the affinities and cleavages that fell along lines of race, class, and culture – frames that are essential to understanding the context that made the educational success of this community possible. For example, although required by law after 1806, throughout the antebellum period the marking of race in legal documentation was inconsistent at best. The absence of a racial designator presumed a person to be white; however, this rule proves insufficiently reliable given that even in apprenticeship records many fathers of color and the majority of sponsoring mothers were given no racial designation. While the mere practice of formally differentiating persons by race indicates that the mark of servitude was never far from consideration in antebellum Louisiana, the common omission of such notation, as well as the regularity with which relationships between *gens de couleur* and whites were willingly recognized, is telling of the socio-racial fluidity within this society. The inconsistency with which racial difference was tracked illustrates how, in early antebellum Louisiana, race had yet to be settled proxy for one's definitive place within society. Therefore, taken not merely as relics of this community's existence, but as part of the ecology of the world in which they circulated, such artifacts yield a broader and more complex rendering of this historical circumstance. Further, they bring into relief the shifts that increasingly flattened class and cultural diversity, and essentialized race.

Interpretation of this wealth of evidence requires attentive reckoning with the broader context in which these circumstances existed. Social lines in Louisiana were drawn on axes of *race*, *class*, and *culture*, and consideration of each of these factors is essential to determining that which differentiated this space from the rest of antebellum American society. Utilizing society,

culture, and individual experience as units of analysis, this work calls on both social history and cultural history for interpreting the contingencies that beget this peculiar case – two theoretical approaches that historians are only recently coming to consider as mutually constructive. Concerned with collective (social) modes of thought, or *mentalités*, expressed over the *longue durée*, social history focuses on the lives of "ordinary people" instead of governments and events. Social analysis requires copious and diverse data connected back to the central question, in this case, what enabled *libres*' high educational attainment?[27] A social, or materialist, conception is useful in theorizing the pragmatic conditions that engendered the special status of Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* as "it does not explain practice from the idea, but explains the formation of ideas from material practice."[28] For instance, examination of numerous manumission petitions, submitted over the course of many decades, informs us more generally about Louisiana's civil and social environment. Moreover, detailed consideration of demographic patterns that shaped Louisiana society, such as intimate ties sustained across racial boundaries, illuminates enduring social norms that rendered race an inconsistent determinant of one's standing within the larger community.[29] Attention to such evidence also reveals *libres*' diverse, and openly pursued, opportunities for instruction – a circumstance that unsettles the understanding that such efforts were, as a matter of course, reflexively opposed by southern whites. Examination of these practices illuminates the conditions that enabled the community of color to become broadly educated and compelled the Louisiana Supreme Court to opine that *gens de couleur libres* were "enlightened by

[27] Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1995), 84; Paula S. Fass, "Cultural History/Social History: Some Reflections on a Continuing Dialogue," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (2003), 43.
[28] Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, second edition, ed. by Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 164.
[29] Appleby et al, *Telling the Truth*.

education."[30] These material trends reveal the ways in which contemporary norms of class and culture substantively benefited Louisiana's *gens de couleur*.

It is here that this work also borrows from theories of social capital, particularly the constituent components of trust, norms, and networks. The concern here is not necessarily the resulting currency, capital, but those aspects of the community that undergirded that currency. Robert Putnam holds that "social capital must often be produced as a by-product of other social attitudes."[31] Accordingly, in Louisiana shared religion, language, and habits (norms) served to develop affinities across the broader community and within the community of color; they created a milieux of mutual understanding and confidence – trust. This trust would lead New Orleans, unlike any other community in North America at the time, to maintain a long-standing militia comprised of free people of color. Trust fostered the creation of networks within and across divisions of race, class, and status, and it was those networks that expanded *gens de couleur libres* educational opportunities. For instance, while the practical training *libres* apprentices received under the tutelage of both white and *libres* masters was instrumental to their future financial independence, the system itself fostered and strengthened networks across the community. These networks not only created educational opportunity, but they subsequently empowered *libres* to participate in occupations in which skill and knowledge could be exercised – further perpetuating the need, means, and desire for education.

A materially grounded social construct can only partially explain the circumstance of this community, however. The reality of racial differentiation in antebellum Louisiana complicates

[30] Louisiana Supreme Court, quoted in Annie Lee West Stahl, "The Free Negro in Ante-Bellum Louisiana," *LHQ* 25 (1945); 315-316. *Seventh Census of the United States*, 1850. Note: In 1850 Louisiana's Free Black illiteracy rate was listed as 19.4%. Effectively, of the total population of 17,465 Free People of Color in the State, 14,076 were considered *literate*.

[31] Robert D. Putnam with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 167.

allegiance strictly along lines of class or custom and confounds what we think we know about race in the United States. Neither the socio-economic status of this community's elite nor French cultural affinity with whites could supersede the inferior station held by the individuals within the *libres* caste. This study, therefore, asks: How did race operate in antebellum Louisiana society to, ultimately, supersede class and culture? In order to answer such a question Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon have suggested that we expand our vision beyond the United States' national borders. They contend that most New World slave societies developed a three-tiered social structure, and in its development of a rigid two-tiered racial caste system it was the rest of the United States that was anomalous, not Louisiana. Race held ideologically different meaning within these spaces, and those meanings shaped the realm in which libres lived out their daily lives and aspirations. Therefore, while common cultural heritage was a point of affinity between whites and *libres* in Louisiana throughout the antebellum period, Americanization ushered in an "age of racial totalitarianism," and the "fierce determination of white creoles to link their identity to a biological rather than a cultural heritage."[32] Measurable changes in the treatment of people of color illuminate a shift in the meaning of racial difference as the antebellum period came to a close, and this shift ultimately led to the demise of the intermediary caste. In this new, Americanized space, "race" conjured up what Paul Gilroy has characterized as "a peculiarly resistant variety of natural difference." Such difference "stands outside of, and in opposition to, most attempts to render it secondary to the overwhelming sameness that overdetermines social relationships."[33] In late antebellum Louisiana, people of color were essentialized and homogenized as non-whites. Thus, affiliations across status and shared norms were outdone by the ideology of racial difference and

[32] Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 189
[33] Ibid., 190; Gilroy, *Against Race*, 29.

the attendant belief in inherent black inferiority as rationale for chattel slavery.

It is here that a top-down cultural consideration is useful, here that we look to the ways in which ideas have the generative power to shape material reality. If we are to understand Louisiana's shifting position on the meaning of race we need to "expand our vision" beyond a sphere that places American (white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) normativity at its center.[34] Cornell West cites the power of conventional modes of thought to "produce and prohibit, develop and delimit… set parameters and draw boundaries for the intelligibility, availability, and legitimacy of certain ideas."[35] These modes of thought delineate the realm of what can be conceived and what conceptions are legitimate. In colonial and early antebellum Louisiana *gens de couleur libres* lived within a relatively liberal conceptual space. That is, the definition of what it meant to be a person of color encompassed the belief that they were respectable, enlightened, and industrious. At the same time, African "blood" was knowable only as a point of comparison to the purity of whiteness; any "taint" of African blood held the mark of servitude, and therefore reduced *libres*' status within the societal hierarchy. As African ancestry came to be the essential defining characteristic of people of color, the possibility of seeing them as anything other than a degraded caste became incomprehensible. Regardless of their merits, Louisiana's *gens de couleur* were shackled by ostensibly inherent racial deficiency. This representation, irrespective of community members' achievements, rendered their equality with whites unintelligible.[36]

The question of this racialization is important not just in understanding the inconsistent

[34] Fass, "Cultural History/Social History," 42.
[35] Cornell West, *The Cornell West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 71.
[36] "…she may have received a virtuous education, have been brought up with the greatest tenderness, may possess various accomplishments… but if it can be proved that she has one drop of negro blood in her veins, the laws do not permit her to contract marriage with a white man." George William Featherstonhaugh, *Excursion Through the Slave States: From Washington on the Potomac to the Frontier of Mexico; With Sketches of Popular Manners and Geological Notices* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968): 141. Originally printed in 1844.

ways in which *libres* were marked and treated within this slave society, but it is essential to the interpretive work of this study. Latrobe revealed a deep understanding of the conceptual distance between how he, and many travelers of his time, understood what they witnessed in Louisiana society, and how locals regarded themselves:

> To entitle a stranger to describe the character of a society, more is required than to have looked at it superficially, and through the medium of habits acquired elsewhere. More than superficial use of the senses is required to ascertain facts of which the senses are the only judges… To determine upon the relative moral or political character of a community requires more time, more talent, and a more philosophical investigation of the history of its habits, and of those causes of them over which no control can be exercised, than traveling bookmakers possess or command.[37]

Like northerners and British travelers, historians are temporal interlopers, in danger of looking at historical actors "through the medium of habits acquired elsewhere." Indeed, much of what we have qualitatively come to understand about this community has relied upon the impressions of travelers and a patchwork of evidence reconstructed through habits of thinking suited to another time and culture. Consequently, the mythology around Louisiana's free people of color has become so densely woven that it is difficult to disentangle impressions from what Latrobe calls the "actual states of things." *Gens de couleur libres* have come to be regarded as wealthy, vain, avaricious, licentious; as feeling themselves to be more white than black. This community, particularly the affluent mixed-race set, are principally remembered for aspiration to a white ideal. According to one historian "Like members of the white elite, leading free black families valued education, and

[37]Benjamin Latrobe, *The Journal of Latrobe: Being the Notes and Sketches of an Architect, Naturalist and Traveler in the United States from 1796-1820* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905), 169, 170.

like rich whites, they educated their children either by means of tutors or private schools."[38] The implicit assumption guiding such a claim is that whiteness, not merely enjoying the liberties enjoyed by whites, was the ideal for this community. Claims like this, therefore, erroneously ground historical inquiry in whiteness as the benchmark for self-definition and humanity, obscuring other possible interpretations.

Certainly, many scholars have acknowledged whites' differential treatment of *gens de couleur*, but with that has come the assertion that white supremacist attitudes informed relationships within the community of color. One noted historian went so far as to hold that, "these freemen married among themselves, and it often seemed that their purpose was to breed themselves closer to the white ideal, perhaps with the hope of someday winning the full acceptance they craved." This scholar ultimately held that, "Aping the white elite did not gain wealthy freemen entry into white society."[39] Such evocative and simplistic reductions have, for some time, controlled the standard vernacular about Louisiana's antebellum community of color. Notably, such testaments have masked the complexities of "race" within Louisiana's community in general, and particularly within its community of color. Being at many points silent, the evidence neither entirely refutes nor expressly supports such interpretations. However, the historical record does prompt us to question many established depictions of Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* as a community. The elite class of *libres* upon whom many historians have based their portrayals of the whole accounted for no more than about 20% of Louisiana's community of color by 1850.

For this reason, this study works to decenter the concept of white superiority as an ideological fact, and as *libres*' motivating ideal. While attentive to the importance of the prevailing

[38] Carl A. Brasseaux, Keith P. Fontenot, and Claude F. Oubre, *Creoles of Color in the Bayou Country* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 73.
[39] Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 282, 280.

ideology of white supremacy within this context, I have been careful to allow it only to demarcate the conceptual boundaries of the actors who espoused those beliefs – it is not considered a viable paradigm by which to discover what is knowable about *gens de couleur libres*. In his consideration of race and the writing of history, Maghan Keita has held that, "There are racialized bodies of knowledge. Race has become a way of knowing." He goes on to say that, "My belief is that race may be a sound tool for historical analysis, but it is untenable for the construction of history."[40] That is, it is not race itself that promises to tell us something meaningful, but the way race is understood, constructed, and used. In this way, this is a story about people who were racialized; race is important to this account insofar as it tells us something meaningful about their experience and opportunity. I have worked to reckon with the evidence holding "*de couleur*" as subtext – that is, to first consider these historical actors as *gens libres* – free people. Race is foregrounded in this study where it meaningfully informs the condition or experiences of this community, but it does not serve as a universal principle. When speaking about this community, persons of color will be identified by the designations *homme*, *femme*, or *gens de couleur libre*(*s*), denoted by the abbreviated *hcl*, *fcl*, or simply *libres*. Race has not been indicated where it is either unimportant or implied.

This is a study about a community of color, and in that it has been essential to allow the historical actors to speak as often and as clearly as evidence will allow. Certainly, the movements of this community were determined by the literal and conceptual boundaries outlined by the dominant, white society; however, such bounds were not self-imposed and, therefore, should not be unquestioningly taken as the community's own limits for self-understanding. I take the position that *gens de couleur libres* despised slavery, not necessarily the enslaved. Further, that *gens de*

[40] Maghan Keita, "Race, the Writing of History, and Culture Wars," *Journal of Black Studies* 33 (2002); 167.

*couleur* aspired to the same opportunity and privilege enjoyed by whites does not necessarily indicate that they aspired to whiteness itself.

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This study is broken into five chapters; the first tracks the particular material, cultural, and political circumstances that gave rise to Louisiana's community of color. This chapter considers Louisiana's colonial context, examining the inconsistent interplay of French social norms and Spanish legal initiatives, as well as the ways in which both served to foster liberal manumission in the region. Further, it considers how the concept of black deficiency operated differently in this space, and how this difference informed relationships across racial boundaries and allowed *gens de couleur libres* to experience greater liberty in freedom than most of their North American counterparts.

While the first chapter focuses on the relationship between laws and broader social conventions, the second delves more deeply into intimate ties, both across race and particularly within the community of color. This examination seeks to revive the question, *Who were gens de couleur libres?* The purpose of this chapter is not to write yet another history about this community's wealth or notable individuals, but to come to an understanding about this community extricated from unsubstantiated impressions by examining the relationships that connected Louisiana's free people of color to the white community and to each other. These relationships proved far from static. Importantly, it is through these bonds that much of the initial wealth was introduced into the community of color, and it is by these networks that the more privileged of this caste used their influence to aid others in the community. This chapter seeks to show not just that *gens de couleur libres* were a diverse community, as has been expressed by historians before, but to illustrate the ways in which they were so. Louisiana's community of color was heterogeneous

both in aspect and economically, and their bonds crossed class, phenotype, and condition of servitude.

The third and fourth chapters directly address the many formal educational opportunities available to Louisiana's community of color. The third chapter, "'in whatever positon fate has placed us': Formal Schooling Across Class," considers the education of the wealthiest of this caste as well as formal schooling available to those from families of lesser means. Through these institutions we see that education was valued by *libres* from varied social and economic positions, not just the wealthy elite. Chapter four looks specifically at education through apprenticeship. The New Orleans Public Library's recently digitized indenture records are of crucial importance to this examination. These documents provide a wealth of information about the education of young men in this community. Not only did such agreements provide occupational training, but they quite often made provision for scholarly instruction. Moreover, these records point us toward additional spaces of academic instruction available to young *libres*. Finally, indenture records give us cues as to this community's literacy in a way that the census might not. Unlike the census, where the designation of "literate" was at the discretion of record takers, apprenticeship agreements *required a signature* or mark by the apprentice and his sponsor. These contracts show that to whatever extent these young men could sign their names, they did so. Apprentices as young as ten years of age demonstrated fluid penmanship in signing these agreements.

This study ends with a consideration of the cultural shifts wrought by Americanization and increasing racialization that circumscribed *libres*' opportunity. The complementary conditions which supported educational attainment for this community can be more deeply understood in relationship to their foreclosure – particularly how the loss of social status proved detrimental to supporting structures of civil forbearance and economic opportunity. Racial tensions begun in the

lead-up to the Civil War ultimately bound the fate of this community with that of the newly liberated slaves. The great irony being that the same State that had averred to the respectability of the community of color codified their degradation in the legalized separation of the races.

**No Such Prohibition: Nineteenth Century Louisiana as Liberated Space**

*It is urged that the rule is founded on the degraded condition of the African in the states where slavery exists, and should prevail in this. The decisions to which we have been referred cannot be considered as authority in our courts. They appear to be based upon statutes which expressly prohibit free persons of color from testifying, not only in criminal, but also in civil cases, in which white persons are parties.*
*No such prohibition exists here.*[1]

~ Louisiana Supreme Court ~

In the 1851 appeal of *The State v. Henry Levy and Jacob Dreyfous* the Louisiana Supreme Court issued a lengthy response to the defense's assertion that the testimony of free persons of color not be admissible. This opinion underscored the understanding that Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* were thought to be a class apart from persons of color in other states. The Court opined:

> Our legislation and jurisprudence upon this subject differ materially from those of the slave States generally, in which the rule contended for prevails. This difference of public policy has no doubt risen from the different condition of that class of persons in this State… In some districts they are respectable from their intelligence, industry and habits of good order. Many of them are enlightened by education, and the instances are by no means rare in which they are large property holders. So far from being in that degraded state which renders them unworthy of belief, they are such persons as courts and juries would not hesitate to believe under oath.[2]

[1] Appeal to *The State v. Henry Levy and Jacob Dreyfous*, 1851. William W. King, *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Louisiana*, Vol. I (New Orleans: T. Rea, 1851), 64.
[2] Ibid.

The Court's reasoning highlights a tautological understanding vis-à-vis Louisiana's free persons of color: *gens de couleur* were reliable witnesses by reason of their favorable condition, yet they enjoyed their favorable condition at the forbearance of those who deemed them reliable. Such a sympathetic characterization of Louisiana's community of color was born of early material and cultural circumstance, and enlarged through the often mercurial choices made by historical actors. Consequently, perception and reality came to be mutually reinforcing: French colonists, as well as French and Spanish policies, placed people of color in a conceptual space that liberated them to realize a way of life that could be typified as "So far from being in that degraded state." In antebellum Louisiana the interplay of structure and culture created an opening in which the prohibitions the hemmed in other communities of color, in slave and free states alike, did not necessarily constrain *gens de couleur libres*.

Indeed, the more one considers the fluidity with which racial difference was defined, negotiated, and at times overlooked in antebellum Louisiana, the more it becomes clear that the relationship between the custom and law was not neatly linear. If we are to understand the educational attainment of free persons of color we must recognize that mandate and action did not express a causal chain, one subsequently following upon the strength of the other, but a dialectic. Law at times shaped practice, and at other times individuals' everyday actions frustrated governmental directives.[3] In this way, the very inconsistency with which racial difference was perceived, and ignored, meant that human action and legal statutes alternately created and circumscribed spaces in which persons of color could exercise their own desires and ambitions.

[3] Rarely did law follow practice and legitimize regional habits, although the government often remained silent on matters of local custom. Consider that at this time policies pertaining to people of color worked to curtail, not grant, rights. Silence in such matters implied that an action was not forbidden. For example, although excluded from the public schools system, no laws were ever passed forbidding the education of free people of color. The government, in its silence, allowed *gens de couleur libres* to openly pursue education where they could.

Although an unintended outcome, in hindsight social and civil realities generated and sustained the particular context that, for a time, benefited *libres*. While no other factor can be said to have overcome racially-determined difference in this narrative, its effect was moderated in the region, creating a space in which *gens de couleur*, as a class, were recognizable as respected members of the community. Hence, just as Winthrop Jordan asserts that race prejudice in the United States was the result of an "unthinking decision," so too was antebellum Louisiana's comparatively liberal racial dynamic the result of largely uncalculated human action, which often mitigated intentional efforts to curtail free persons' liberties.[4]

*Libres*' educational attainment cannot be understood without first understanding the particular context that undergirded this community's liberty. This chapter explores the origins of this community of color, from servitude to freedom. Further, it considers the comprehensive context of these origins. The relatively broadened realm of action that these circumstances yielded to free persons of color ultimately freed them to aspire and then, to a notable extent, to realize their aspirations. Study of the unique status attainment of Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* is a well-worn path. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is not merely to reiterate that which many historians have ably detailed. The status and opportunity enjoyed by Louisiana's *gens de couleur* was the result of at-once fortuitous convergence of improvised social norms and civil agency.[5] The purpose here is to consider the *relationship* between these dynamics; to make sense of how socio-cultural norms created spaces for, and were reinforced by, economic and educational autonomy. The goal here is to understand how these circumstances created an exceptional space for high educational

[4] Winthrop Jordon, *White over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro, 1550-1812* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), 72.
[5] On the one hand, liberal social norms freed them from the substantial hindrance known by people of color in other states – negative liberty. On the other hand, financial resources and civil protection provided them with the means necessary to actively pursue their desired aims – positive liberty.

attainment for this community of color. Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* were unbound not just in body but in possibility, and the latter was the liberation that enabled them to attain widespread literacy, training in skilled trades, and financial independence.

In colonial Louisiana hostile physical environment, lack of resources, and demographic heterogeneity converged to produce what Gwendolyn Midlo Hall has deemed "one of the most racially flexible societies in the Americas."[6] As early French officials held, it could be reasonably assumed that all persons of African descent in the Louisiana territory had somewhere in their lineage a predecessor who had been forcibly removed to the region as chattel. African ancestry also implied a heritage of bondage, and, therefore, liberation for a number of Louisiana's people of African descent reveals more than formal emancipation; *libres*' circumstance in freedom illuminates racial differentiation within the region's unique French and Spanish contexts. The local cultural and civil circumstances that introduced a space for this free class were shaped and magnified by the physical realities of intimate social conditions, racial mixture, and the fortifying in-migration of cultural familiars from Saint-Domingue. The paths to freedom available to Louisiana's enslaved population, and the subsequent opportunities upon which *libres* capitalized, further illuminate a regional conception of racial difference that was fundamentally less restrictive than perpetuated in Anglo-America.

## **An Uncommon Circumstance**

Louisiana's French cultural origins established those of African ancestry in a circumstance that treated race quite differently from conceptions exemplified throughout the regions of the

[6] Midlo Hall, *Africans*, 241. Note: It is acknowledge that Native Americans played a vital role in this history, and they were essential to the survival of many colonists even as they contested colonial encroachment upon their territories. Hall asserts that, "the insecurity of this frontier world created a society in which the three races [whites, Natives, and Africans] were deeply dependent upon each other and physical survival was often more important than accumulation of wealth," 238.

nation colonized by the British. As Alden T. Vaughan has pointed out, "the English propensity to identify Africans with apes… engendered a profound… prejudice against Africans that Jamestown colonists unconsciously carried to America."[7] French colonials likewise brought with them notions of race and class; however, Frank Tannenbaum has famously theorized that conceptions of race in the Caribbean and Latin America were far more generous to the enslaved than the prevailing racial consciousness across British North America.[8] In particular, historian Jerah Johnson has maintained that the English desire for homogeneity led to segregationist policies and practices, whereas, seeking to unite a heterogeneous population under a shared public culture, French mercantilism emphasized social liberty. Instead of segregation, the French "forged a social consciousness premised upon assimilation of the African population as members of the community with social rights and defined limits to their subjugation to their masters."[9] This foundational ethos held not only in the Louisiana territory, but for France's other colonial holdings, such as Saint-Domingue, as well.

That Louisiana was a territory eager to exploit slave labor moderated, but did not completely subdue, a more liberal orientation toward free people of color. In 1866, contemporary Nathan Willey reflected on the unique way which Louisiana forbearers had viewed slavery:

> Among the French and the Spanish settlers and their descendants, the *condition* of the colored people, rather than their *color* as a badge of slavery, has been the subject of popular prejudice. They looked upon a slave and his descendants as an inferior

[7] Alden T. Vaughn, *The Roots of American Racism: Essays on the Colonial Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 144.
[8] Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).
[9] Jerah Johnson, "Colonial New Orleans: A Fragment of the Eighteenth-Century Ethos," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, 12-57, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 14-20. Johnson holds that disunities between corporatist groups, a holdover from medieval times, was a trademark of the French population. Too large to homogenize all of the various classed and ethnic interests, French government aimed to cultivate a love of France that would serve as a source of common identity and unification regardless of faction. McGowan quoted in Johnson, 40.

> class, simply because they were in a degrading condition of servitude, and not because they bore darker skin. In the North and in States settled by the English the prejudice is one of color rather than a condition.[10]

While the extent to which the French and Spanish disregarded differences of race may be overstated by Mr. Willey, the distinction between the attitudes of early Louisianans and English colonials is an important one. Indeed, slavery was abolished in all of France's holdings in 1794, and in his early study of *gens de couleur libres* under *l'Ancien Regime*, Auguste LeBeau held that a slave on domestic French soil *ipso facto* became free. Interracial marriage was also legal in France until 1778, and thereafter *gens de couleur* still maintained all other rights and privileges enjoyed by all French subjects.[11] In 1777, Colonial Superior Council Deputy Émilien Petit observed that, there was so little prejudice in France that they, "without difficulty, received mulattoes, quadroons, or other descendants of the Negro race in the military reserves, in the new nobility, and in the offices of the magistrate."[12] Indeed, a number of young *libres* were able to receive an advanced education in France into the nineteenth century. Further, the ease with which many notable *gens de couleur*, such as famous composer, Edmond Dédé and noted playwright Victor Séjour were welcomed into polite French society, indicates that such consideration held well after the United States had taken control of the territory.

From Louisiana's inception, French colonial policy in regard to the enslaved African was greatly influenced by the guiding principles of Roman Catholicism. According to historian Clark Robenstine, "absolute monarchs in Catholic countries viewed religion as a political concern, with

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[10] Nathan Willey, "Education of the Colored People of Louisiana," *Harpers*, July 1866, 246.
[11] "Attendu la maxime constant que tout esclave entrant en France devient libre de plein droit," Auguste LeBeau, *De La Condition Des Gens de Couleur Libres Sous L'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Guillaumin & Co., 1903), 12. There was an ordinance restraining the number of *gens de couleur libres* who could live in France, however, LeBeau countered that at no point was it rigorously enforced, 11; see also 13, 15-16.
[12] LeBeau, *De la Condition*, 12, 13.

both church and state under their jurisdiction."[13] As early as the sixteenth century, attention to African salvation came to North America by way of Catholic missionaries eager to introduce the light of salvation to the enslaved. Carter G. Woodson noted how French Jesuit missionary Paul Le Jeune delighted that "he had again become a real preceptor in that he was teaching a little Negro the alphabet." Woodson deemed such proselytizing "religion with letters;" the faithful's "first duty was to educate these crude elements to enable them not only to read the truth for themselves, but to appreciate the supremacy of the Christian religion."[14] So earnest was this spiritual directive that the French Crown mandated devotion to the Catholic faith and the religious instruction of all within its dominion, including slaves. In 1685 Louis XIV decreed in *Le Code Noir* that, "all slaves should be instructed and baptized in the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman religion."[15] This mandate was further emphasized in 1718 when the French government turned Louisiana's colonial operations over to the Company of the West, binding the Company to procure the "salvation of the settlers, the Indians, the Savages and the Negroes," whom they desired to be "instructed in the true Religion." Faced with such a heterogeneous population it was natural that the Catholic Church be appealed to as a means to uphold the social and civil structures necessary to "turn Louisiana into an outpost of model French civility."[16]

The Catholic Church's early role in conveying French culture to the Louisiana territory was endorsed by colonial governments as a matter of policy; however, the Church's active participation in colonial affairs was also generative as clergy negotiated as-yet unsettled racial boundaries. The church not only served royal objectives, but in the execution of its mission it also

[13] Clark Robenstine, "French Colonial Policy and the Education of Women and Minorities: Louisiana in the Early Eighteenth Century," *History of Education Quarterly* 32 (1992), 201.
[14] Woodson, *Education of the Negro*, 8. See Also Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 8, 9.
[15] Ibid., 8; *Le Code Noir*, 1685, Article II.
[16] Robenstine, "French," 201; Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 43.

helped shape the liberal social norms that set Louisiana apart. Over the seventeenth century the French Catholic Church experienced broad reform, which included a return to following the example of Christ, an austere lifestyle, and "selfless service in humanitarian works."[17] Louisiana proved an apt venue in which to exercise the particular apostolic stirrings of the period. According to Caryn Cossé Bell, in practice the Capuchin Friars, who dominated church affairs in Louisiana during the colonial period, were compelled by such a spirit of reform: "In adhering to a universalist ethic that recognized the spiritual equality of all Catholics, the church itself served as a transmitter of progressive social practices and radical French ideas during the early decades of the nineteenth century." In their exercise of this egalitarian mindset Friars at St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans were said to have administered sacraments to residents, regardless of race or condition of servitude. Further, clergy baptized slave infants as well as the illegitimate infants born of interracial unions.[18]

Likewise, historian Emily Clark has held that the Catholic Counter-Reformation created a space in which women were able to expand their active roles and visibility within the Church's mission. In seventeenth century France thousands of women flocked to a number of orders and congregations "that replaced cloistered contemplation with various forms of apostolic activism."[19] It was during this expansion that the Ursuline nuns, commensurate with their mission as a teaching order, were seeking an opportunity to take their calling to the new colony. Although asked to New Orleans to take charge of the poorly managed hospital, upon their 1727 arrival the sisters' first public work was to open a school for girls. The Ursuline school included instruction for young girls of European descent, slaves, free negresses, and Native Americans. As a result, Clark holds that at the close of the French colonial period the "Ursulines' influence revealed itself in high

[17] Caryn Cossé Bell, "French Religious Culture in Afro-Creole New Orleans, 1718-1877," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 17, (1999); 5.
[18] Ibid., 6.
[19] Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 2.

female literacy rates and a vibrant Afro-Catholic community."[20] Such outreach to this community created enduring bonds between the community of color and the Catholic Church. According to Bell, Catholic Reformation idealism, in part, "assured a close relationship between Capuchins and the city's enslaved and free black population."[21] The Church's early ministry established the roots of abiding bonds with the region's nascent community of color.

Roman Catholicism was a point of French cultural unification that transcended class and condition, and the openness with which Louisiana's people of color were admitted into the fold was not lost upon visiting onlookers. British traveler Harriet Martineau described her early nineteenth century visit to St. Louis Cathedral with noted curiosity: "kneeling on the pavement may be seen a multitude, of every shade of complexion, from the fair Scotchwoman or German to the jet-black pure African." New Orleans transplant Thomas L. Nichols affirmed this depiction, asserting that, "the maddest abolitionist could not wish for an exhibition of greater equality or a more perfect amalgamation."[22] As the Church's influence and Louisiana's community of color grew, the wealthiest of the region's *gens de couleur* patronized parochial academies, such as the Carmelite school. In fact, the Church's early and enduring education of girls of color played an important role in normalizing the education of all people of color within the region. Further, wealthy *libres* financially supported local orders, and in 1841 New Orleans *libres* helped to establish St. Augustine's Catholic Church, the first black Catholic parish in the United States.[23] Serving as a stabilizing pillar in the French colony, the Catholic Church's inclusion of people of

[20] Ibid., 3.
[21] Bell, "French Religious," 9.
[22] Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1838), 259; Thomas L. Nichols, *Forty Years of American Life* (London: J. Maxwell and Co., 1864), 188.
[23] For instance, in 1827 Baptiste Meullion paid a subscription to St. Landry Catholic Church, Fr. Favius Henry Rossie receipt for Baptiste Meullion donation to St. Landry Catholic Church- 1827 May 5, Meullion Family Papers, Mss. 243, 294, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La. (hereafter cited as Meullion Papers).

color planted the seeds of literacy and legitimized persons of color as a reputable part of the larger community.

The religious ethos that came to be cultural norm in Louisiana stood in contrast to the Anglo-Protestant understanding of slavery and the enslaved. Early Protestant slave owners expressed antipathy towards slaves' conversion to Christianity as it was feared that servitude would prove inconsistent with "unwritten law that no Christian could be held a slave."[24] Worried that the spiritual redemption of slaves would necessarily set them free in body, most early Protestant slave owners refused to allow their slaves to be baptized. According to Vaughan, rather than reconcile the question in terms of higher Biblical principles, the Virginia legislature decreed that, "the conferring of baptisme doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or ffreedome."[25] This legal sanction allowed masters the benevolent indulgence of granting shackled salvation without threat to their own earthly benefit. Moreover, they, along with clergy, could salve their collective conscience with fulfillment of their moral obligation. These assurances in place, the edification of slaves was thence set to with increased vigor.

Notably, one's religious position on people of color was not determined entirely by the economics of slavery. Even after post-revolutionary widespread abolition in the northern states, the degradation of people of color continued to be maintained on Biblical grounds. In 1838 William Jay issued an impassioned indictment of the treatment of free people of color outside of the slave states, railing against northern clergy's endorsement of racial prejudice. Citing one Rev. Bacon, Jay highlighted the moral inconsistency he found so objectionable: "The *Soodra* is not farther separated from the *Brahim* in regard to all his privileges, civil, intellectual, and moral, than the

[24] Woodson, *Education of the Negro*, 10.
[25] Quoted in Alden T. Vaughn, *The Roots of American Racism: Essays on the Colonial Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 59.

negro from the white man by the prejudices which result from the difference made between them by the GOD OF NATURE." According to Jay, this errant Northern gospel proclaimed that either inherent racial difference, or racial prejudice itself, was the "fiat of the Almighty."[26] While the Catholic clergy in Louisiana, themselves owning slaves, by no means took a position against the institution, their treatment of both the enslaved and *libres* stood in notable contrast to that of many carrying the mantle of Christianity outside of Louisiana's cultural borders. Travelers found New Orleans' integrated congregations noteworthy as many northern churches restricted membership, forcing people of color to establish and support their own institutions.[27] Working within the legal and social constructs of the society to which they ministered, Catholic missionaries, supported by Royal mandate, conceived of the enslaved not merely as chattel, but as beings with mortal souls and need for bonds of kinship. Bell has gone so far as to contend that The French Code Noir of 1724 "subordinated all colonists to Catholic precepts which recognized the moral personality of the slave."[28] These principles made the humanity of the enslaved, and by extension, of the region's people of color, intelligible.

Certainly, French colonial policy was a reflection of French domestic sensibilities; yet, due to an insatiable appetite for agricultural labor in France's Caribbean colonies, forced servitude, and consequently the color line, was more rigidly guarded in Louisiana than in France. Slavery was abolished in France and all of its holdings in 1794; however, Napoleon quickly reinstated the institution in colonies growing sugarcane in 1802. Under Spanish rule from 1763 until 1802, at no

[26] William Jay, *Condition of the Free People of Color*, in *The Free People of Color* (New York: Arno Press, 1838; reprint 1969), 374, 373.
[27] Notably, the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, demonstrated a long-standing commitment to fulfilling the need for education in the Black community. The Quakers were vocal opponents of slavery, and began providing schooling for people of color in North Carolina in the early 1700s. They were active in Black education in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York and carried this mission out through the antebellum period. See Woodson, *Education*; Jordan, *White Over Black*; Curry, *Free Black*; Moss, *Schooling Citizens*.
[28] Bell, "French Religious," 6.

time in the interim did the practice cease in Louisiana. Although during this time *gens de couleur* were claimed to have experienced little prejudice in France, a 1777 memorandum to the Governor of Martinique from the King highlighted a stark divergence in colonial and domestic policy. The Crown held that "at whatever distance [people of color] are from their origin they always retain the mark of slavery." By the same token, M. Maillard, Ministre of Cayenne asserted that "it must be observed… that all negroes have been transported to the colonies as slaves; that slavery has imprinted an ineffaceable mark on all of their posterity, as upon those of mixed-blood, and that consequently those who thereby descend can never enter into the class of whites."[29] Despite the fact that the colony was under Spanish rule at this time, these attitudes are notable as French cultural identification and customs maintained a firm hold in the region well into the American period. No matter to what degree *sang-mélés* (mixed-race persons) were removed from their African ancestry, they would always be marked by that heritage.

The French differed from the British in their treatment of race, then, not due to diverging conceptions of white supremacy and blood purity, but in their subsequent conduct toward the subordinate class of *gens de couleur libres*. This distinction is an important one. The significance of how people of color fared under French norms lay not so much in their treatment as slaves, but in their condition as free persons. Although liberty was still bounded for non-whites, the1724 *Code Noir* reiterated the decree of its 1685 original, that manumission bestowed all rights and privileges of liberty upon freed slaves:

> Article LIX. We grant to freed slaves the same rights, privileges and immunities that are enjoyed by freeborn persons. We desire that they are deserving of this

[29] "à quelque distance qu'ils soient de leur origine ils conservent toujours la tache d'esclavage… Il faut observer… que tous les negres ont été transportés aux colonies comme esclaves; que esclavage a imprimé une tache ineffaçable sur tout leur postérité, même sur celle que se trouve d'un sang-mêlé, et que conséquemment ceux qui en descendent ne peuvent jamais entrer dans la classe des blancs," quoted in LeBeau, *De la Condition*, 4.

> acquired freedom, and that this freedom gives them, as much for their person as for their property, the same happiness that natural liberty has on our other subjects.[30]

This foundational precept made explicit the status of free *and freed* persons of color in Louisiana, in liberty they were naturalized French subjects. Situating the growth of this community against the experiences of other free communities of color, the relationship between Louisiana's cultural foundations and the territory's civil codes regarding *libres* takes on greater clarity. Such goodwill was not granted in neighboring slave states. In Mississippi, the Supreme Court inextricably bound social and civil condition to race when it stated that, "the laws of this state presume a negro *prima facie* to be a slave."[31] Likewise, a South Carolina Court of Appeals officially opined that, "a free African population is a curse to any country … [and] a dead weight to the progress of improvement."[32] In Louisiana, even while laws were passed to curtail the in-migration of English-speaking free persons of color, in regard to creole *gens de couleur*, and ultimately Saint-Dominguan refugees, it was declared: "considering how much probability there is in favor of the liberty of these persons, they ought not be deprived of it upon mere presumption." Plainly, in Louisiana it was held as "settled doctrine" that "persons of color are presumed to be free."[33] While

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[30] France. Sovereign (1643-1715 : Louis XIV*). Le code noir ou Edit du Roi, servant de règlement pour le gouvernement & l'administration de justice & la police des iles françaises de l'Amérique, & pour la discipline & le commerce des negres & esclaves dans ledit pays. : Donné à Versailles au mois de mars 1685. Avec l'Edit du mois d'aout 1685. portant établissement d'un conseil souverain & de quatre sièges royaux dans la cote de l'Isle de S. Domingue*. Paris: Chez Claude Girard, 1735. Archives.org. https://archive.org/details/lecodenoirouedi00fran. Also see, *Edict of the King: On the subject of the Policy regarding the Islands of French America, March 1685. Recorded at the sovereign Council of Saint-Domingue, 6 May 1687*. https://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/335/.

[31] *Randall v. the State*, 12 Miss. 349. Quoted in, Charles S. Sydnor, "The Free Negro in Mississippi before the Civil War," *The American Historical Review* 32, no. 4 (1927), 769.

[32] James M. Volo and Dorothy Deneen Volo, *Encyclopedia of the Antebellum South* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), 109.

[33] *Adelle v. Beauregard*, 1810, quoted in François-Xavier Martin, *Martin's Reports of cases argued and determined in the Supreme Court of Louisiana and in the Superior court of the territory of Louisiana, Orleans Term Reports, Vols. I and II, and Louisiana Term Reports, Vol. I.* (New Orleans: Samuel M. Stewart, 1847), 99; Quoted in Annie Lee West Stahl, "The Free Negro in Ante-Bellum Louisiana," *LHQ* 25 (1942); 303. *Miller v. Belmonti*, in Merritt M. Robinson, *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Louisiana: Volume 11* (New Orleans: E. Johns & Company, 1846), 339-345.

in Louisiana white supremacy was as pronounced as in neighboring slave states, the degradation ascribed to African ancestry appears to not have been as absolute. As Willey suggested, in Louisiana there persisted a delineation between one's race and the condition of servitude that had long been indistinguishable in other parts of the country

Logic proves elusive when considering the complexities of a culture in which persons of color were enabled to prosper even while they were inescapably degraded by reason of their racial inheritance. Tensions between the rigid conception of blood purity and the fluid meaning of African lineage continually led to contradictions between antebellum Louisiana's policies and customs. Inconsistencies of regulation and practice, between word and deed, were a regional mainstay well into the nineteenth century. At times, inhabitants obstinately defied the will of authorities, such as in 1818 when one overseer wrote to his absentee landlord of a fugitive slave that apparently had long evaded apprehension. He confided that, "the public is suspected to have favored his evasion because they didn't want to open their doors, and only did so after the police threatened to force them in the name of the law."[34] At the same time, directives, such as the affirmation that *gens de couleur* ought to enjoy "the same happiness that natural liberty has on our other subjects," implied greater charity than was exercised in practice. The letter of the *Code* remained intact well after the territory was relinquished to the United States in 1803; however, the spirit of its charge was undermined by subsequent ordinances such as the 1806 *Black Code*, which regulated the activities of slaves as well as *gens de couleur libres*. The "other subjects" to which the 1685 document referred, therefore, was not *all* (particularly not white) subjects, but other free persons of color.

[34] "la publie le soupçonne d'avoir favorisé son évasion, parce qu'il n'a voulu ouvrir ses portes que d'après la justice la menacé de les enforcir du nom de la loi." John Boze, Letter 1818, f 24.1, Ste-Gême Family Papers, MSS 100, Williams Research Center, (HNOC) (hereafter cited as Boze).

In reality, Louisiana, as did her sister colony of Saint-Domingue, supported a three-tiered social structure in which whites occupied the topmost tier, slaves rested at the bottom, and *gens de couleur libres* operated as a safeguard in the middle. Historians have agreed that not only did this hierarchy exist within Caribbean and Latin American slave societies, but many have highlighted that this structure was intentionally contrived. Early on, the French colonial government assembled a militia composed of men of color as a part of the colony's defense against local indigenous populations as well as a precaution against slave insurrection. When the Spanish took control of colony the need for this middle caste became a matter of increasing concern as they found themselves in the position of governing a hostile population yet loyal to the French Crown. According to Bell, "Spanish authorities cultivated and exploited rivalries among contending factions as a matter of official policy."[35] The logic was that to deny *libres* certain rights would incite their ire and compel them to identify with the enslaved, and, conversely, granting people of color certain privileges would drive a greater wedge between them and the enslaved, ensuring their loyalty. Therefore, it was considered prudent to uphold particular rights for free persons of color in order to mitigate insurrectionary alliances with bondsmen or disruptive white colonists. At the same time, the ultimate subjection of this class to whites ensured that whites would neither align themselves with *libres*, nor would *libres* risk the loss of privilege by working against the government from which they derived their status.[36]

As French officials held, *gens de couleur* could never leave this middle caste; they were

[35] Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 1718-1868* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 17.
[36] Carl Brasseaux, *Creoles of Color of the Gulf South*, ed. James H. Dormon (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 72. See Midlo Hall, *Africans*; Thomas N. Ingersoll, "Free Blacks in a Slave Society: New Orleans, 1718-1812," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 48 (1991); 173-200; Foner, "Free People of Color;" Sterkx, *Free Negro*.

condemned to remain there *à l'infini*.[37] Nonetheless, the characterization that this community occupied a middling status is misleading. As historian Ira Berlin has observed, due to the personal relationships between whites and a number of those they released from bondage, greater attention was paid to their financial stability and training: "ties of blood and shared life-style cut across the color line to nurture a belief that some free Negroes might be more free than Negro."[38] Slaveholders saw these individuals as exceptional and, therefore, not represented by the mass that remained bound. Historian Henry Bullock has further pointed out that policy did not necessarily determine the actions of local inhabitants; "interracial permissiveness sprang up outside of the official structure." This was not, however, the result of greater racial tolerance in slave holding states, but due to the secure sense of superiority whites held surrounded by evidence of black submission in chattel slavery.[39] Conversely, as Ira Berlin has characterized, northern free people of color were considered "more black than free," and Hilary Moss has asserted that without the protection of a slave system or black codes that Northerners were "far more uncomfortable with the free black presence than their southern counterparts."[40] Slavery visibly affirming white hegemony, in Louisiana, laws that supported the rights of people of color were not reflexively considered to be a threat or contradiction to white supremacy. This position is exemplified by one 1816 amendment to the 1806 *Black Code*, which held not only that slaves could not testify against whites, but also that "no slave shall be admitted as a witness either in civil or criminal matters for or against a free person of color, except in case such free individual be charged with having raised

[37] LeBeau, *De la Condition*, 3.
[38] Berlin, *Slaves*, 198.
[39] Henry Bullock, *A History of Negro Education in the South from 1619 to the Present*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 4. By contrast, in the case of Providence, Curry explained that, "the view of the Negro as grossly inferior to the white…, which both inspired and was reinforced by these discriminations, gave rise to a variety of slights, insults, and assaults that served no conceivable social purpose… save that of bolstering the ego of participating whites," *Free Black*, 93.
[40] Berlin, *Slaves*, 21; Moss, *Schooling*, 60.

or attempted to raise an insurrection among the slaves of this State."[41] Indeed, *gens de couleur libres* experienced substantial freedom of action within Louisiana's broadly defined breach between bondage and whiteness.

Although prior to the American Civil War this community did not enjoy the wholesale liberties and protections of citizenship that whites did, they occupied a literal and discursive space in which the most explicit barriers to material opportunity were tempered. As a result of the alternate treatment of race within Louisiana's cultural borders, persons of color, while not exempt from Southern standards of deference to whites, were bestowed with certain rights and privileges not granted black communities throughout the North and South. Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* found themselves much further removed from chattel slavery than their North American counterparts. This circumstance endured for over a century.

**Roots of a Society**

The social conditions within which Louisiana's race relations developed were seeded in the material conditions of early colonization. The territory was inhospitable and untamed; inhabitants were beleaguered by heat and humidity, a long fever season, and land infested with stinging insects and deadly reptiles. Additionally, colonists were perpetually under the threat of attack from local indigenous tribes. Given such conditions, administrators struggled to entice settlers to the region. The earliest population consisted largely of military personnel, pioneering *coureurs de bois* from New France (Canada), French exiles, and African slaves.[42] At the same time, the King's estimation of the Louisiana territory ranged from tepid ambivalence to a cold

[41] "An Act to Amend the act entitled the 'Black Code,' or an act prescribing the rules and conduct with respect to Negroes and other Slaves of this territory," approved, March 19, 1816, 85. Sec. I. 1806 Black Code, in Bullard and Curry, *Statute Laws*, 66.
[42] Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*; Mathé Allain, "In Search of a Policy," in *The French experience in Louisiana*, ed. Glenn R. Conrad, 86-105 (Lafayette: University of Southern Louisiana, 1995), 108.

disregard. In 1683 he confided, "I am convinced the discovery of Sieur de La Salle is quite useless."[43] Given this low evaluation of the colony and the fact that France found itself nearly bankrupt by the War of Spanish Secession, material support from across the Atlantic was inconsistent and woefully insufficient to support the region's colonial inhabitants. According to Mathé Allain, from 1708 to 1711 not a single ship arrived with food supplies; soldiers were sent to live with local tribes and colonists survived on a meagre diet of boiled corn and bear fat.[44] In 1712, Naval Commissary Martin Darteguiette Diron reported, "the soldiers are deserting to the Indian enemies…. It is pitiful also to see them as they are all naked and most often living on crushed and boiled Indian corn with a piece of meat." Of the colonists he relayed, they "are languishing. They are few. They cannot undertake anything of importance."[45] No matter the hardships experienced in the mother country, for most they proved preferable to the unknown perils of voyaging to an unforgiving land. Immigration, and thereby Louisiana's white population, remained low.

Upon winning proprietary rights to the Louisiana territory in 1717, John Law's Company, later the Company of the West, took up a rigorous promotional campaign to populate the region.[46] However, when travel literature colorfully depicting the region as "filled with gold, silver, copper, and lead mines" proved less than fruitful in inspiring mass colonization, the company turned to forced immigration to increase Louisiana's numbers. Between 1716 and 1720, France enacted a policy of deporting convicted criminals from urban hospitals and jails, as well as rounding up

[43] Quote in Allain, "In search," 90.
[44] Allain, "In Search," 91.
[45] Quoted in Carl A. Brasseaux, "The Image of Louisiana and the Failure of Voluntary French Immigration, 1683-1731," in *The French experience in Louisiana*, ed. Glenn R. Conrad, 153-162 (Lafayette: University of Southern Louisiana, 1995), 156.
[46] From 1718 to 1731 the John Law's Company, subsequently the Company of the West had corporate control of the colony.

countryside vagabonds and loafers for the same.[47] At its height, this policy became a means to denounce and export incorrigible sons and daughters, and even dispose of romantic rivals and troublesome neighbors. One historian found that of the over 8,000 new arrivals in Louisiana between 1717 and 1721, over 6,000 of them were slaves, *engagées* (indentured servants), soldiers, and *forcées* (forced exiles).[48] Evidently, most did not embark upon the journey to the territory by choice. Moreover, those fortunate enough to survive the arduous sea-passage found their lot miserably cast with earlier arrivals – pestilence was ample and food was in short supply. Mathé Allain has held that, "ill-prepared for the rough life of the frontier… most immigrants died from fevers, exhaustion, and privation." With the failure and subsequent termination of France's forced exile policy in 1720, white population increase stalled; by 1726 the total population of French citizens (including Germans and *engagées*) was tallied at under 2,000 in number.[49]

A census taken in 1746 cited black inhabitants surpassing the number of whites by almost fifty percent, at roughly 4,700 to 3,200.[50] Hence, as was the case with colonies throughout the Americas, Louisiana was developed on the backs of African toil. In Louisiana, early reliance on African labor was foundational to the favorable characterization of people of color. Notably, the same demanding environmental conditions that suppressed white population growth also determined the roles played by the enslaved, and, thereby, their perceived value within the foundling society. For instance, rice was the only reliable food crop in the isolated colony during

[47] Glenn R. Conrad, "Emigration Forcée," in *The French Experience in Louisiana*, ed. Glenn R. Conrad, 106-114. (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1995).
[48] Mathé Allain, "French Immigration Policies: Louisiana, 1699-1715," in *The French Experience in Louisiana*, ed. Glenn R. Conrad, 106-114. Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1995); James Hardy Jr., "The Transportation of Convicts to Colonial Louisiana," in *The French experience in Louisiana*, ed. Glenn R. Conrad, 115-124 (Lafayette: University of Southern Louisiana, 1995); Conrad, "Emigration Forcée," Midlo Hall, *Africans*; Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 38. Note: *engagées* included convicted criminals whose sentence had been commuted in lieu of three years of indentured servitude in the colony. Midlo Hall, *Africans*, 5.
[49] Allain, "In Search," 98; Midlo Hall, *Africans*, 8.
[50] Midlo Hall, *Africans*, 176.

this period, and importing slaves who were familiar with growing this staple became a life-saving priority. In 1719 a ship arrived with several barrels of seed rice and, at the request of colony administrators, several Africans who knew how to cultivate it. By contrast, it was held that white exiles were determined to be "inferior to slaves as farm and plantation labor."[51] James Hardy Jr. has highlighted the paradox in authorities' hopes that "worthless vagabonds would become model artisans and farmers" in the harsh new world. Contrary to officials' reasoning, the rugged territory did not inspire reform in the hearts of those considered unfit for polite French society. Therefore, while white inhabitants were characterized as "lazy," Africans' agricultural knowledge was deemed essential to the survival of the ragged colony.[52]

Louisiana's earliest immigrants also relied heavily on Africans as a skilled workforce. As Hardy suggests, African bondsmen were valued over convict labor not just for their economy; they proved, among other things, adept at metalworking, shipbuilding, and river transport.[53] When the Company of the West returned control of the colony to the Louis XIV in 1731, the King's officials ensured that the crown retained possession of the company's slaves, maintaining that, "most of them have skilled trades and work on fortifications. Others are sailors… Not one is attached to the plantation cultivating the land."[54] In fact, Louisiana's difficult physical environment stalled the development of the region's plantation economy until enhanced methods of sugar granulation were

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[51] Ibid., 130.

[52] James Hardy Jr., "Transp. Of Convicts," 116, 122; Midlo Hall, *Africans*, 10, 121-123; Daniel Usner, "From African Captivity to American Slavery: The Introduction of Black Laborers to Colonial Louisiana," In *The French experience in Louisiana*, ed. Glenn R. Conrad, 183-200, (Lafayette: University of Southern Louisiana, 1995), 183. Midlo Hall quotes a superior council member who purchased an African cook for 1,000 pounds: it is "impossible to use white men or women because of their laziness as well as their licentiousness," *Africans*, 130. Interestingly, Usner holds that, while alligators and mosquitos kept unaccustomed Frenchman away from the New Orleans settlement during the early cultivation of the land, "within a year of African migration to New Orleans, black slaves were planting and preparing corn, beans, and rice for the subsistence of themselves and their masters," "From African Captivity," 185.

[53] Midlo Hall, *Africans*, 133; Usner, "From African Captivity," 186, 189.

[54] Quoted in Midlo Hall, *Africans*, 134, ftnt 20. See also Donald E. Everett, "Free Persons of Color in Colonial Louisiana," *LHQ* 7 (1966): 21-50.

achieved and the introduction of cotton at the end of the eighteenth century.[55] As large-scale agricultural production had yet to be realized, slavery into the Spanish period, beginning in 1763, took on a decidedly urban flavor. According to Shannon Lee Dawdy, as the colony stabilized, the proportion of bound to free inhabitants declined in the overall territory from 1732 to 1766. However, in New Orleans, the enslaved share of the population rose from 12% to 35% between 1726 and 1766. Urban servitude often granted bondspersons greater autonomy, and provided opportunities to acquire skills beyond those needed for repetitive labor. As John W. Blassingame has maintained, a high return on skilled labor led many white masters to pay white artisans to train their slaves, who they then hired out; "often the slave had to furnish his own food and give the master a portion of his wages."[56] Further, historian Daniel Usner has held that a dearth of reliable white workers, and the profitability of African labor, escalated the "apprenticeship of slaves to reliable skilled artisans…. Company and privately owned slaves were apprenticed to brickmakers, joiners, blacksmiths, locksmiths, sculptors, wheelwrights, saddlers, masons, and carpenters." For instance, in 1727, locksmith Laurent Chevirty agreed to apprentice a slave in his trade, as well as to take on another such apprentice with the arrival of the next slave ship. Hence, by 1732, 15% of the city's bondsmen lived in artisan households, and 25% of New Orleans' tradesmen shared their households with slaves.[57] The demand for skilled labor in the taming of colonial Louisiana allowed Africans to be cast not merely as brute labor, but as a knowledgeable and capable workforce, assets to a community whose survival was as yet uncertain. Notably, the training of these men in skilled trades would later prove instrumental to *libres*' professional prospects. These early conditions

[55] Jerah Johnson, "Colonial New Orleans," 19; Usner, "From African Captivity," 30.
[56] For Urban Slavery, see Richard Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Berlin, *Slaves*, Curry, *Free Black*; Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, 2; Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire: French Colonial New Orleans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 177.
[57] Usner, "From African Captivity," 189; Dawdy, *Devil's Empire*, 175. Records of the Superior Council of Louisiana "Apprenticed Slave," Oct. 5, 1727, *LHQ* 4 (1921); 230.

planted the seeds of occupational security for urban Louisiana's tradesmen of color into the nineteenth century as young free men of color would continue to apprentice in the same trades as their bound forbearers.[58]

**Manumission**

As antebellum Louisiana treated race differently than whites in regions settled by the British, so too did inhabitants approach emancipation according to their own understanding of slavery and of those deserving of freedom. Both the French and Spanish appear to have been favorable toward manumission in their own characteristic ways. The French allowed the practice as a matter of personal prerogative, whereas the Spanish approached the liberation of slaves as an aspect of colonial control.

Prior to the implementation of Spanish policy in 1769, slaves could be manumitted in recognition for some exceptional act, or by a master aged twenty years or older without requiring any special cause. Such broad parameters and laxity in accounting for race has left sparse evidence of manumission practices during the earlier period outside of exceptional circumstances. For instance, the story of Louis Congo, a slave who earned his freedom by serving as Louisiana's first executioner has been well-told. Less broadly circulated is an account given by French colonial officer Dumont de Montigny, who told of a slave that also won his freedom for refusing the same honor. Jeannot, a bondsman owned by the Company of the West, was called upon to serve as executioner in the capital of New Orleans in exchange for his freedom. At first he attempted to refuse, but when he found that he could not he took a hatchet to his own wrist, then contending

[58] New Orleans (La.) Office of the Mayor. Indentures, 1809-1843. Louisiana Division/City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (hereafter cited as Indentures). Bricklayers, coopers, cabinetmakers, and joiners ranked as the most common occupations for apprentices between 1810 and 1843.

that he could not possibly fulfill the obligation due to his injury. Instead of punishing Jeannot, Montigny recounted that surgeons were called to his aid, and once healed he was put in charge of the Company's other slaves. Purportedly, another, "less sensitive Negro" accepted the post, likely Louis Congo.[59] Another well-documented act of manumission resulted from the colony's vulnerability to assault by neighboring indigenous tribes; in 1729 runaway slaves had taken up with the Natchez against French encroachment, destroying the settlement and killing over two hundred whites. The French responded by recruiting a handful of slaves to fight against the Natchez and, thereby, earn their freedom. Attorney General Fleuriau petitioned not only to free "those negroes who by report of the officers in charge proved loyally useful to the upper French post," but proposed that, "a military company [be] organized among the like elect negroes for instant call against the Indians on occasion." Although there appears to be no record of formal manumission, the French subsequently called upon this same militia, by then free men, to defend the colony in 1735.[60]

The liberty earned by these men or color, and their continued employment in the service of the colony, is telling. Certainly, a pre-Revolutionary detachment of armed people of color is interesting in its own right, but what makes such a circumstance exceptional is the maintenance of this corps over time. Although slaves were also enlisted to aid both colonists and the British in the American Revolution, thereafter blacks, slave or otherwise, were barred from service. As David Silverman notes, "in Anglo-American tradition bearing arms was a symbol of political equality,"

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[59] Everett, "Free Persons," 29. Dumont de Montigny, *Mémoires historiques sur la Louisiane contenant ce qui est arrivé de plus mémorable depuis l'année 1687 jusqu'à présent, avec l'établissement de la colonie françoise dans cette province de l'Amérique septentrionale sous la direction de la Compagnie des Indes, le climat, la nature & les productions de ce pays, l'origine et la religion des sauvages qui l'habitent, leurs moeurs et leurs coutumes, &c.*, (Paris: Chez CI. J.B. Bauche, 1753), 244-246. Also cited in Everett, "Free Persons," 29.

[60] "Proposition to Free Negroes for Military Merit," May 13, 1730, Records of the Superior Council, *LHQ* 4 (1922); 524; Ingersoll, "Free Blacks," 178. Everett, "Free Persons," 28.

a condition that would not be afforded people of color even in exchange for their loyalty.[61] The early use of troops of color in the security of the colony was an accepted matter of necessity for both the French and Spanish. In fact, arriving from Havana in 1769, Governor O'Reilly was attended by a contingent of over two hundred *moreno* militiamen who aided in the forcible establishment of Spanish rule.[62] In Louisiana, the corps worked on fortifications, kept guard at strategic posts, and pursued runaway slaves. Notably, this militia was called upon even after the racial unrest of South Carolina's 1739 Stono Rebellion and the Haitian Revolution at the turn of the nineteenth century. That the Orleans territorial government considered the use of an armed militia of color a viable strategy amid concerns of slave unrest shows some measure of trust that was placed in this armed contingent. When Louisiana was ceded to the United States in 1803, Governor Claiborne faced pressure from the Federal government to disband the militia, which had by this time grown to three regiments and over two hundred individuals. Balancing the possibility of unsettling the community of color and the white fears, Claiborne determined that maintaining the corps, "under existing circumstances," was the "wisest Course to pursue." Although whites reacted to the continuation of this force with indignation, Claiborne's prudence proved beneficial as the militia assisted in quelling Louisiana's own elaborate slave uprising in 1811, and troops of color were instrumental in the 1814 Battle of New Orleans.[63]

Apart from such notable accounts of emancipation during the French colonial period, early

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[61] David J. Silverman, "Racial Walls: Race and the Emergence of American White Nationalism," in *Anglicizing America: Empire, Revolution, Republic*, ed. Ignacio Gallup-Diaz, Andrew Shankman, David J. Silverman, and John M. Murrin (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 203.

[62] *"…les gens de couleur, libres et affranchis, depuis l'âge de 15 ans j'usqua celui de 60, devaient être établis dans chaque quartier en compagnie de cinquante hommes. La discipline et la police de ces compagnies étaient les même que dans les compagnies de milices des blancs*," LeBeau, *De la Condition*, 34. "*Moreno*" typically indicates darker-complected people of color, Kimberly Hanger, "Conflicting Loyalties: The French Revolution and Free People of Color in Spanish New Orleans," *LHQ* 34 (1993) 9. Spear, "Faculties Conceded to Her," 76.

[63] Quoted in Donald E. Everett, "Emigres and Militiamen: Free Persons of Color in New Orleans, 1803-1815," *The Journal of Negro History* 38 (1953), 391, 394-398; Bell, *Revolution*, 9, 17, 29-30, 31-37.

records of the Superior Council only reveal occasional petitions to free favored bondspersons. Just as often, however, the names of individuals of color identified as free, absent any formal record of liberation, appear as litigants in disputes and criminal cases.[64] As historian Wendy Warren suggests, tracking the population of color via such contentious encounters is problematic as it can be well assumed that the majority of this community, free or enslaved, did not run afoul of the law and other inhabitants. These litigants are unlikely to be representative of the population as a whole. Further, without additional record it is difficult to determine how these persons obtained their freedom, or whether they simply entered the colony as free.[65] The evidentiary gap, coupled with the official rhetoric, has led some scholars to conclude that the French held greater antipathy toward the manumission of their bondspeople than the Spanish, and there has been considerable scholarly debate as to the relative climate toward manumission during the French and Spanish regimes. Some historians have studied the ways in which Spanish policy explicitly favored emancipation, using this as evidence of Spanish liberality in contrast to rigid French policy. For instance, the Spanish were supportive of self-purchase and slaves' ability to own property, as well as their right to receive donations from whites, which enabled them obtain the means for self-purchase.[66] The French did not allow such measures. These observable policy differences made

[64] The gap in evidence proves problematic as historians have all turned to the same source, the records of the Superior Council and the Cabildo summarized and transcribed in the *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*. While this source is extremely useful, it has also created an echo chamber of evidence, scholars all turning to the same handful of cases as evidence. Historians have used creative methods to illustrate broader emancipatory trends during the French period; however, the individual stories are much more difficult to track. See Midlo Hall, *Africans*; Dawdy, *Devil's Empire*.

[65] Wendy Warren, "Forgotten History: How the New England Colonists Embraced the Slave Trade," NPR, Fresh Air radio interview, Warren discussed her new book, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization In Early America*, June 21, 2016·1:11 PM ET, http://www.npr.org/2016/06/21/482874478/forgotten-history-how-the-new-england-colonists-embraced-the-slave-trade.

[66] See Hans Baade, "The law of Slavery in Spanish Louisiana, 1769-1803," in *Louisiana's Legal Heritage*, ed. Edward F. Haas (Pensacola: Perdido Bay Press, 1983); Dawdy, *Devil's Empire*; Thomas N. Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon in Early New Orleans: The First Slave Society in the Deep South, 1718-1819* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999); Gilbert C. Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves: The Spanish Regulation of Slavery in Louisiana, 1763-1803* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999); Spear, "Faculties Conceded to Her." Donation allowed the master or parties other than the master (white and black alike) to give the means of self-

formal manumission during the Spanish period not only more common, but more readily traceable. Further, this has led scholars such as Hans Baade to deem the notion of liberal French policy "questionable."[67] Yet, attentiveness only to the intentions and processes of colonial governments overlooks the rich everyday experiences of, and choices made by, colonists – black and white, free and enslaved. What has been thereby missed is that, in fact, French and Spanish approaches to race and manumission appear to have differed in kind. French colonists were characteristically dismissive of official policy to the extent that local Spanish government was dutifully bound to it. In terms of emancipation in antebellum Louisiana, then, it is more useful to consider the effects of French custom and Spanish law within the colony.[68]

Lack of definitive evidence regarding French manumission practices is illustrative of what Dawdy terms Louisiana's "rogue colonialism": "*Colonialism was as much a creation of rogues and independent agents as it was the project of imperial states*."[69] In this way, French colonists appear to have been far less meticulous about officially delineating racial difference, and the Crown proved more indulgent of, or perhaps less apprehensive about, masters' prerogative to do with their slaves as they desired. Article LV. of the 1685 *Code Noir* maintained that, "Masters twenty years of age may free their slaves by any act toward the living or due to death, without their having to give just cause for their actions, nor do they require parental advice as long as they are

purchase to the slave. In addition, as slaves were considered mortgage-able property, manumission itself could be seen as a donation. As property, a slave had monetary value, and granting that slave freedom was equivalent to a donation of that value to the slave. This actually had the effect of reversing some manumissions that were granted by will, as the decedent's estate might not have been sufficient to cover the "donated" value of the slave.

[67] Baade, "The law of Slavery," 69, 48. See also Everett, "Free Persons," 23.

[68] Jennifer Spear also argues that, beyond law, culture did matter rule Spanish rule. She contends that Spanish lawmakers were unaware of conditions on-the-ground, "Faculties Conceded Her," 67. Scholars agree that, despite near sixty years of Spanish rule, the colony always remained French in population and culture. See Johnson, "Colonial New Orleans;" Dawdy, *Devil's Empire*; Virginia L. Gould, "Urban Slavery, Urban Freedom: The Manumission of Jacqueline Lemelle," in *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, 298-314 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

[69] Dawdy, *Devil's Empire*, 19.

minors of 25 years of age."[70] Scholars have pointed to the 1724 *Code Noir* clarification that all manumissions be approved by the Superior Council in New Orleans as indication of a desire to limit the practice, this act effectively creating an inconvenient prerequisite. However, as was a trademark of the French territory, custom at times prevailed over bureaucracy, and at times bureaucracy was even used in ways that thwarted governmental intentions. In either case, well after Louisiana had become a part of the United States, French inhabitants were bound first to culture and custom. As an illustrative example, in 1834 Jean Baptiste Vasnier petitioned for the manumission of his thirteen year old son upon having been advised that his son's "freedom was not valid… and that after his death his child should be a slave." The document cited:

> That the petitioner is Jean Louis Vasnier… That the petitioner is the natural father and owner of a mulatto boy named Jean Louis Benjamin Vasnier; that as will appear from this deed of sale hereto appended the petitioner purchased the said boy with the view of granting him his freedom… that ignorant of the laws of the state and deeming it sufficient the aforesaid boy was baptised as free and has ever been so considered by every body.[71]

As with the younger Vasnier, it is likely that many were considered, *de facto*, emancipated prior to Spanish rule. Notably, such informal manumission at times resulted in the "reenslavement" of a number of "freed" persons in cases where their liberty was called into question.[72] Nonetheless,

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[70] *Le Code Noir*, 1685. Article LV. Masters twenty years of age may free their slaves by any act toward the living or due to death, without their having to give just cause for their actions, nor do they require parental advice as long as they are minors of 25 years of age.

[71] Emancipation petition of Jim Baptiste Vasnier, Number 21B, 1834, Louisiana. Parish Court (Orleans Parish). Petitions for the emancipation of slaves, 1813-1843. Louisiana Division/City Archives, New Orleans Public Library (hereafter cited as Petitions)

[72] See Loren Schweninger, "The Fragile Nature of Freedom: Free Women of Color in the U.S. South," in *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas*, eds. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, 106-124 (Champaign: The University of Illinois Press, 2004); Judith K. Schafer, "'Open and Notorious Concubinage': The Emancipation of Slave Mistresses by Will and the Supreme Court in Antebellum Louisiana," *LHQ* 28 (1987); 165-182; Winston De Ville, *The Guillory Manuscripts, 1764, 1765, 1766, 1773: With a Synopsis of Early Guillory Family History* (Baton Rouge: Provincial Press, 2003).

those who understood the laws and who complied with official manumission procedures during the French period give us a glimpse of the prevailing understanding of race and servitude at the time. Interestingly, in 1745 Vincent La Porche reversed one-drop logic of racial identification when he filed a statement with the Superior Council averring that Marie Louise was not a slave and, "should enjoy complete liberty, being the daughter of a Frenchman."[73]

The French *laissez-faire* approach to manumission may not be readily apparent in the registers of the Superior Council, but it does bear out in the record. Using census data, Dawdy has illustrated how French record-takers, presumably representing the interests of the local government, appeared to be concerned only secondarily with origin and color, primarily looking to status of freedom or bondage as markers of one's place in society. According to Dawdy, "never in the French period did they enforce stark racial differences among the free."[74] She notes that many residents listed with no racial designation in 1763, the year France officially ceded the colony to the Spanish, were listed as free persons of color on the 1766 census. In fact, the Spanish had three censuses taken in New Orleans prior to 1770 in order to ascertain the population of *gens de couleur libres*, each taken by French creole assistants who reported back with numbers below forty-five. Dissatisfied with the results, Spanish officials dispatched free man of color Nicolas Bacus, who returned 195 free men of color eligible for the militia. One reason for the preceding oversights was the protracted racial hierarchies to which the Spanish subscribed, by which they parsed degrees of African ancestry with attentive detail. Designations included *negro*, *mulato*, *cuarterón*, *grifo*, *pardo*, and *moreno*.[75] Midlo Hall has concluded that French census-takers were

[73] November 14, 1745, Records of the Superior Council of Louisiana, *LHQ* 14 (1931); 598.
[74] Dawdy, *Devil's Empire*, 155, 156. Also in Everett, "Free Persons," 30; Midlo Hall, *Africans*, 260.
[75] Lawrence N. Powell, *The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 295. See also Moreau de Saint-Mery, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de lisle Saint-Domingue*. 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 1797); Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*; Kimberly S. Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

confused by Spanish concepts of racial hierarchy, which "sought to create separate social groupings based on varying degrees of race mixture, promoting the emergence of separate groups among the free population of African descent;" these concepts were "foreign to French creoles." In the face of racial ambiguity French creole record-keepers simply included many people of color in the white population.[76] Additionally, Dawdy has observed that Bacus' number did not include free women nor children of color, estimating that the actual population was between 400 and 800 individuals, or ten to twenty percent of the city's population. Considering that Spanish law was not implemented and enforced until 1770, this result could not have been due to a shift in policy. Dawdy contends instead that "Spanish policies created the city's large new social group simply by coloring people who were already there and were already free."[77]

During the French period freedom appears to have been granted quietly and, despite the directive that petitions be taken to the Superior Council, with little formality. French inhabitants made extralegal decisions about where inhabitants belonged within the social structure. These judgements relied more upon their own relationships to their neighbors than on any rubric of caste. For instance, Hall explains how, as a courtesy to wealthy white men who maintained households with women of color, "these women were listed as white in the census regardless of their color."[78] Likewise, it is not uncommon to find the names of known persons of color in directories and civil documents at times noted as such and at others without any special designation. This held true even after an 1808 ordinance requiring that any person of color be noted as such on all legal documents.[79] For instance, Babel Lartigue, Celeste Bertrand, and Victoire Millon were all mothers

[76] Midlo Hall, *Africans*, 240.
[77] Dawdy, *Devil's Empire*, 178. Note that the population of free women of color always superseded that of the men. Liberty was easier for women to obtain due to their lower market value and intimate relationships across the color line. For this reason, the number likely skewed closer to the higher estimation.
[78] Midlo Hall, *Africans*, 240.
[79] "it shall be the duty of all notaries, or other public officers, not to pass any act wherein any free person of color may be concerned, without inserting after the name and surname of such free person of color, these words, "free

acting as sponsors for their sons' (indicated as young men of color) apprenticeships. Yet, as with many such sponsors, these women were not noted as women of color. Additionally, into the nineteenth century well-known men of color to whom young men were apprenticed, such as Hilaire Duparc, James Turley, and Jean Rousseau, were often not designated with the characteristic *hcl*.[80] By overlooking race, or by absorbing persons of color normatively into the white community, the local population revealed how the regional construction of race was not only a matter of blood purity, but also a matter of perception. Just as much as racial designations could be used to differentiate and exclude, their omission could also demonstrate inclusion.

Notwithstanding, the data make it clear that formal emancipation did increase during the Spanish period. Indeed, 1770 serves as a convenient, and illustrative, starting point for tracking manumission in the territory as it was not until the Spanish Governor's decree in November of that year that acts of manumission were required to be in notarial form, and the manumitted issued a *carta de libertad*.[81] Apprehensive about the loyalty of white creoles and the local planter class, Spanish lawmakers saw granting greater opportunity for manumission as a means to, at the same time, mitigate the threat of slave insurrection and temper the power of the wealthy planter class. On the whole, Louisiana inhabitants used the new policies to their advantage and the population of *gens de couleur libres* experienced notable growth during this period. One source has found that

man or free woman of color;" that it shall be, likewise, the duty of all printers and auctioneers, who give public notices, the object of which is to announce the sale of some property belonging to [a] free person of color…," "An Act to prescribe certain formalities respecting Free Persons of Color," Sec. I., 159-160, approved March 31, 1808, in Henry A. Bullard and Thomas Curry, *A Statute Laws of the Statute Laws of the State of Louisiana, From the Change of Government to the Year 184, inclusive* (New Orleans: E. Johns, 1842), 5.

[80] Simon with Syler and Raimond sponsored by Babel Lartigue, Volume 3, Number 192, 1820; Piere Postigue with Valentin Syler sponsored by Celeste Bertrand, Volume 3, Number 230, 1821; Joseph Dupard with James Lambert sponsored by Victoire Millon, Volume 4, Number 18, 1823, Indentures. *Homme de couleur libre*.

[81] Hans Baade, "Law of Slavery," 67. Baade discusses Governor Unzaga's Novemver 9th, 1770 decree that all sales and donations of slaves be in notarial form. This seems to have been taken as applicable to manumissions as well; Baade found that, "freedom-purchase cases decided for the plaintiff uniformly ordered the master to execute a notarial *carta de libertad*." Also see Midlo Hall, *Africans*, 260.

788 acts of manumission were recorded from 1770 to 1803 in the city of New Orleans alone. More broadly, Thomas Ingersoll has enumerated just over 2,600 manumission requests – including outright emancipations, third-party purchase for the purpose of emancipation, and self-purchase – were entered across the region from 1770 to 1809. One notary, Pedro Pedesclaux, authenticated close to fifty such petitions between January and December of 1803.[82] Despite the Spanish tendency to track race, an exact, agreed upon count of Louisiana's *libres* before the region was ceded to the United States in 1803 is inconclusive. However, it is thought that by 1806 Louisiana's free community of color had increased to roughly 2,000 individuals.[83]

Spanish policy certainly played a role in the classification and growth of this distinct class. Ingersoll has gone so far as to maintain that Spanish codes "removed all impediments to manumission."[84] While such a claim overstates the case – slaves could not simply walk away from bondage – the new laws introduced several courses by which the enslaved could obtain liberty. Scholars agree that the most instrumental changes were the adaptation of *coartación*, a system of self-purchase previously implemented in Cuba under the *Siete Partidas*, and the ability of slaves to hold and accumulate property. The latter provision enabled the enslaved to amass the means necessary to take liberal advantage of the former. What is remarkable about *coartación* is that it allowed a slave to purchase freedom even against the will of the master. By this method, if the master would not agree to a price or requested a sum that appeared excessive, the slave could petition the court for a reasonable appraisal of his or her fair market value and then make

[82] Ingersoll, "Free Blacks," 183, 188; Midlo Hall, *Africans*, 278. New Orleans Notarial Archives, Pedro Pedesclaux Index, Vol. 43-45. Note: These numbers encompass only the Spanish and early American periods.
[83] The Louisiana Statistical Table of 1797 enumerates the population at roughly 1,850. Everett places their number at 2,312 by 1806, and 5,727 by 1810, "Émigrés," 377. Another account has the population rising from 195 in 1770 to around 1500 in 1795. This is based upon the conservative numbers taken by the Spanish, Midlo Hall, *Africans*, 278.
[84] Ingersoll, "Free Blacks," 180.

arrangements to, in full or incrementally, compensate the master for that amount. This system was compulsory – provided a slave was in good social standing, the master could not refuse, giving a slave the right to appeal to the courts for a third-party appraisal that both parties would be bound to agree to.[85] By contrast, blacks in the purportedly more enlightened free states were denied the right to any legal recognition. The Ohio Legislature held that "blacks and mulattoes… have no Constitutional right to present their petitions to the General Assembly for any purpose whatsoever," contending that any plea entertained by the governing body was not a matter of obligation but of indulgence.[86]

Certainly, not only were Louisiana's enslaved empowered under the state's laws, but many appear to have taken advantage of their legal recourse. Although not always successful, bondspeople regularly vied for free status in the courts. In one case, although hostile to free people of color, the laws of the state of Ohio secured the freedom of one Louisiana slave. In the 1824 case of *Lunsford v. Coquillon* the plaintiff alleged her freedom on the grounds of having lived in a free state. After residing for some time as a slave in Kentucky, Lunsford was moved by the defendant to Ohio, where she remained for a number of years. When Lunsford agitated for her freedom under Ohio state law she was taken back to Kentucky, and subsequently to Louisiana, where she sued for her freedom. The Court held that, as slavery did not exist in Ohio, the plaintiff was "effectually emancipated" while living in that state. Likewise, in the case of *Marie Louise v. Mariot et al.*, plaintiff Marie Louise petitioned for her freedom on the grounds that the defendants had removed her to France, "where slavery is not tolerated." Put to the review of a jury, it was upheld that "Being free one moment in France, it was not in the power of her former owner to reduce [Marie Louise]

[85] For self-purchase see Baade, "Law of Slavery;" Ingersoll, "Free Blacks;" Hanger, *Bounded Lives.*
[86] Quoted in Curry, *Free Black*, 87.

again to slavery."[87] Given the legal means to contest their absolute status as slaves, bound people of color revealed themselves, even in slavery, to be adept in navigating the remedies available to them.

In addition to such recourse, in the case of *coartación* slaves would have required the means to accumulate the funds by which to purchase their freedom. Not only did the Spanish allow slaves to receive donations from whites, but they were able to own property; under the French all slave possessions were the property of the master. Additionally, the French *Code Noir* had mandated that the enslaved not be worked on Sundays, and any services they did perform were to be compensated, providing a means for securing income by which to acquire one's freedom. There has been some disagreement as to whether this edict was followed in French Louisiana. Ingersoll has cited an annotated copy of *Le Code Noir* in which a contemporary's comments indicate that almost every tenet was ignored. On the other hand, in the early eighteenth century Dumont reported that "some inhabitants give their Negroes Saturdays and Sundays to themselves… they thus work for others who do not have slaves, and who pay them." Further, one bondsperson relayed to traveler Frederick Law Olmstead that he never worked on Sundays, and, although the French plantations had in the past worked their people on Sundays, "they did not so much now." Given such reports and the great activity of people of color in the Sunday markets consistently reported by travelers to the city, it appears that, at least to some extent, Sunday served as a day in which the enslaved could work for their own benefit, hiring their services out or selling their goods and produce.[88] In

[87] Jacob D. Wheeler, *A Practical Treatise on the Law of Slavery. Being a Compilation of all the Decisions Made on that Subject, in the Several Courts of the United States, and State Courts* (New York: A Pollock Jr., 1837), 335, 348-349.

[88] Thomas N. Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 135; Montigny, *Memoires*, 243. Frederick Law Olmstead, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States: Based upon Three Former Volumes of Journeys by the Same Author* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1862.), 338. See Thomas L. Nichols, *Forty Years of American Life* (London: J. Maxwell and Co., 1864); Martineau, *Retrospect*; Latrobe, *Journal*.

this manner, some bondspeople were able to work and save up enough money to buy their own freedom. Once free, *gens de couleur* could then apply their earnings to securing the freedom of family members and friends.

This system contributed to the growth of Louisiana's community of color in no small measure. According to Ingersoll, of the 2,618 manumissions considered between 1770 and 1809, over half (1,330) were self-purchase arrangements. Of those, 612 involved a third-party payer, and the fact that the total number of petitions initiated by white men came to less one fifth of all requests led him to conclude that "the creation of the free black population of New Orleans was dominated by the initiative of blacks, not whites."[89] Such a conclusion is apt; people of color exercised exceptional initiative in advocating for their own liberation. In fact, Lawrence N. Powell found that in the three years preceding the Louisiana Purchase *coartación* accounted for three out of every four *cartas de libertad* issued.[90] Looking at manumissions during this period in greater detail, Kimberly Hanger further found that self-purchase was initiated more often by *moreno*, (presumably dark-skinned) slaves. Taken with outright manumission, *morenos* constituted over fifty percent of the total, or liberation at a 3:2 ratio over mixed (presumably lighter-skinned) slaves. Hence, while it can be rightfully held that familial ties with whites improved one's prospects for liberation, *coartación* gave those of more pronounced African ancestry significantly greater opportunity to enter into the free class.[91]

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[89] Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 183, 188.
[90] Powell, *Accidental City*, 283.
[91] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*; Powell, *Accidental City*, 283. Note: not only white men, but white women, also took notable advantage of lenient manumission law. Regarding Ingersoll's data, it would be useful to know how many outright manumissions were initiated by white men, white women, and free people of color. The assumption is that white men sought liberty for their mistresses and children; however, many white women and people of color also submitted requests, and many white men submitted petitions for aged and male slaves – persons unlikely to be romantically involved with the petitioner. Notably, these numbers appear to also illustrate the broad acceptance of emancipation in general as almost half of all manumission during this period were made without payment or condition.

*Coartación* clearly engendered substantial opportunity for the enslaved to pursue freedom by means other than ingratiating themselves to masters in the vague hope of inspiring some future benevolence. Indeed, Spanish manumission policy and black initiative may have, in turn, redefined some slave-master relationships. Hans Baade found that about nine out of every ten self-purchase petitions "did not have to be vindicated by litigation," freedom was "purchased at a price agreed upon by both parties."[92] French and Spanish slave codes, as well as ubiquitous urban servitude, provided a unique level of autonomy for the enslaved, and this may have suited some masters as well as it suited bondspersons. It is likely that slaveowners even dangled the prospect of contracting for one's liberty before their bondspersons. Although compulsory self-purchase was prohibited in 1807, slaves still maintained the right to purchase their freedom with their master's consent. In the mid 1830's one English traveler, Harriet Martineau, explained just such an arrangement:

> At Mobile I met some relatives, who kindly urged my taking possession of their house at New-Orleans during my stay of ten days…. With the house we were, of course, to have the services of my friend's slaves. He told me something of their history. He had tried all ways to obtain good service, and could not succeed. He had attempted wages, treating his people like free servants, &c…. His present plan was promising them freedom and an establishment in a free state after a short term of years in case of good desert. He offered to take care of the money they earned in leisure hours, and to pay them interest upon it.[93]

One notable aspect of this account is the autonomy of the slaves, who, although at the master's disposal, independently maintained the household during his absence. Records do not indicate how often promises of liberation for good service may have been made, nor how often they were kept;

[92] Baade, "Law of Slavery," 68.
[93] "…no person shall be compelled, either directly or indirectly, to emancipate his or her slave or slaves," quoted in. Spear, "Faculties Conceded Her;" Martineau, *Retrospect*, 255. For urban slavery see Gould, "Urban Slavery"; Wade, *Slavery in the Cities.*

however, such accounts do indicate the existence of dealings between slave and master that at times allowed the enslaved to operate as their own agents. Spanish laws may have accustomed Louisiana's urban slaveholders to negotiating terms of manumission with their bondspeople by satisfying masters that they were appropriately compensated in exchange.

Nonetheless, Spanish policy alone does not explain the favorable position in which emancipation in the Louisiana territory placed the liberated. Evidence shows that French cultural practice, which allowed masters to preferentially release favored bondspersons, was augmented by Spanish policies that enabled the enslaved to act as their own agents. Yet, at the same time as the Spanish provided more explicit opportunities for the enslaved to obtain liberty, the new government also instituted rules that imposed greater impediments on free persons of color.[94] Once Spanish rule had been established, ordinances that racially defined and differentiated free people of color worked to further proscribe the actions of those not of the white caste. Accordingly, measures meant to classify *gens de couleur libres*, and thereby maintain separation between persons of color and whites, were assiduously pursued under Spanish rule. Spanish Civil law, however, proved impotent against French custom. In 1778, one dictum of the proposed *Loi Municipale* was the banning of interracial concubinage, a mandate that Lawrence Powell has characterized as, "dead-on-arrival" as drafters of the code were clearly "swimming against the currents of community norms."[95] Eight years later, in an effort to curtail the practice of white men taking free women of color as partners, Governor Esteban Miró aggressively reinforced a long-unheeded ordinance that prohibited the wearing of plumes or jewelry by women of this class. Instead, women of color were required to have their hair bound in a kerchief (*tignon*). Rather than

[94] Sterkx, *Free Negro*, 37.
[95] Powell, *Accidental City*, 291.

amend conventional definitions of what constituted appropriate relationships, or who could be lawfully wed, the government required that inhabitants adhere to pre-defined, racially determined boundaries.[96]

Nonetheless, colonists stood resolute in exercising French legal practices and cultural ways as it suited them. As one resident described the French response to Spanish rule, "public meetings were called, and they resolved as one man, not to submit to the outrage which the new order of things would impose upon them."[97] Hence, although the strict force with which the *tignon* ordinance was imposed did produce the immediate result that free women of color in and around New Orleans began to bind their hair under a kerchief, this practice did nothing to produce the desired result. As suggested by numerous onlookers, intimate contact between white men and women of color, free and enslaved, continued unabated. The same resident maintained, "there are hundreds of instances of this kind, men of the first respectability, having for their bed companions slave women of every degree of color from the darkest hue to the soft and mellow tinge of the beautiful Quadroon."[98]

It is important to note that French opposition to Spanish government included hostility toward lenient manumission laws, such as *coartación*, highlighting the inconsistency with which white inhabitants weighed racial difference. French colonists were amenable to manumitting those bondspersons whom they believe to be an exception to the rule of African degradation; most often that meant those with blood ties to whites. As a testament to this inclination, by 1850 the Federal

[96] The "Tignon law" was reinforced as a part of Governor Esteban Miro's Bando de Buen Gobierno. See Bell, Revolution, 19; Baade, "Law of Slavery," 65; Grace King, *New Orleans; The Place and the People* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1895, reprint 1926), 342.
[97] King, *New Orleans;* Resident, "*Truth is stranger than fiction": New Orleans as It Is: Its Manners and Customs--Morals--Fashionable Life--Profanation of the Sabbath--Prostitution--Licentiousness--Slave Markets and Slavery, &c., &c., &c* (Utica: De Witt C. Grove, 1849), 8.
[98] Resident, *Stranger than Fiction*, 41-42.

census placed the mixed-race population as the majority of *gens de couleur libres* at 14,083 in comparison with a free black population of only 3,379. Moreover, as stated above, it is likely that the former number omitted those who had been subsumed into the white population by social acceptance or census-takers' erroneous reporting.[99] Spanish policy certainly made paths to freedom more uniform, explicit, and accommodating, particularly for bondspersons without familial ties to whites. However, beyond such expanded means it does not appear to have greatly altered French inhabitants' already fluid personal relationships to people of color, free or enslaved.

What is truly intriguing about Louisiana's relatively liberal manumission practices is their persistence across race, over time, and uninhibited by class. Applicants did not all represent the planter elite. In these formal appeals we see glimpses of relationships that abided over and above presumed cleavages. We see something of the fluidity, even transience of race as a meaningful proxy for standing in this society. Indeed, despite the American government's apprehensions about Louisiana's large, and growing, community of color, the liberatory tradition did not immediately stall when the territory transferred to the United States in 1803. Even after compulsory *coartación* was restricted, manumission applications continued to be submitted with regularity. From 1813 to 1843, at least 860 petitions were submitted just in New Orleans, a noteworthy number of which sought liberty for multiple persons. For instance, in 1827 planter Bernard Marigny, "wishing to reward the services of some of his slaves," submitted a request to emancipate Joseph Mandeville, Marie-Jeanne, Eleonore, Marie Louise, and Celeste.[100] Five years later James Dunn, a free man of

[99] J.D.B. DeBow, *Statistical view of the United States: A Compendium of the Seventh Census, to which are added the results of every previous census, beginning with 1790, in comparative tables, with explanatory and illustrative notes, based upon the schedules and other official sources of information* (Washington, D.C.: A.O.P. Nicholson, public printer, 1854); Midlo Hall, *Africans*, 238-240; Sterkx, *Free Negro*, 102.

[100] Petitions, Emancipation petition of Bernard Marigny, Number 60C, 1827. Given that a notable number of petitions sought freedom for multiple candidates, it is safe to estimate that these records represent requests to manumit upwards of 1,000 persons.

color, petitioned for the liberty of his wife Maria and their two children, Oscar and Jane. On December 8th, 1832, it was recorded that "the Police Jury unanimously declare that they consent to the emancipation of said mulatto woman Maria & her two children Oscar & Jane, without being compelled to leave the state." Likewise, in 1834 Mollier, Molliercine, and Marie Rose, the children of Mollier Duvernay *hcl*, were granted freedom "without being compelled to leave the state."[101] Notably, although by law those manumitted were required to remove themselves from the territory within one month of liberation, language requesting that freedpersons not be compelled to do so was commonplace, and seems to have presented no obstacle to consent.[102] An overwhelming majority of manumission petitions contained a clause requesting that bondspersons be freed "without being obliged to leave the state," and the regularity of approvals over these years indicates that the Police Jury was not opposed to the increase of the creole free community of color.

Such temperate administration of the official policy sat in stark contrast to neighboring states. Whether one considers French colonial custom or Spanish policy, in antebellum Louisiana the means to freedom, and one's prospects upon liberation, substantially differed from British-inspired norms. In Mississippi manumission was only granted by act of the legislature. Charles Sydnor has found that before 1842 there was little objection to manumission, as long as the freed person was removed from the state; "it was illegal at all times for these freedmen to return to Mississippi."[103] Sydnor cites one citizen who, well versed in the laws governing slavery in the state, explained that all manumissions made without express consent of the legislature were "null

[101] Petitions, Emancipation petition of James Dunn, Number 40B, 1832; Emancipation petition of Mollier Duvernay, Number 20B, 1834.
[102] *An Act to prevent free persons of color from entering this State and for other purposes, approved March 16, 1830*, 12. Sec. X, in Bullard and Curry, *Statute Laws*. In March, 1831this act was amended (14. Sec. II) to exclude the mandatory removal of any slaves who had rendered "long, faithful or important services" to the petitioner or petitioner's family. Given that this act was introduced at the same time as the preceding Act, but not passed until a year later, indicates a continuing demand for such provision.
[103] Charles Sydnor, "The Free Negro in Mississippi before the Civil War," *The American Historical* Review 32 (1927), 775.

and void," and as soon as the freedperson returned "by that very act, he forfeits his freedom." The author concluded by clarifying the "very object of the law, *viz*: the non-accumulation of free negroes in the State."[104] Strict enforcement of such regulations certainly proved effective. In 1823, of six petitions for freedom, the Mississippi Legislature only granted three manumissions, and of twelve requests in 1826, all were denied.[105] Given the tenuous nature of liberty in the state, it is not surprising that the free black population in Mississippi barely topped five hundred individuals by 1830, or only .7% of the free population. Notably, Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina also mandated that slaves only be freed by legislative act; in 1830 the proportion of both Georgia and Alabama's free communities of color were not much higher than that of Mississippi at .8%. In fact, South Carolina's population of free persons of color, despite the notably large community in the city of Charleston, only reached 3% of all free inhabitants in the state in 1830.[106]

Unlike their neighbors, in Louisiana it appears that at the beginning of the nineteenth century lawmakers were far more concerned with stemming the introduction of "foreign" free blacks than with curtailing the increase of its own population of *libres*. Further, although by 1803 Louisiana had become a U.S. territory, local inhabitants maintained their own customary views of what constituted a foreigner. At the same time as manumission was working to increase Louisiana's community of color, the population was substantially augmented by two sizeable waves of refugees arriving from the French speaking colony of Saint-Domingue. In 1791 revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture began what came to be a sustained slave uprising against the Saint-Dominguan landed elite, a revolution that turned against whites and *gens de*

[104] Quoted in Sydnor, "Free Negro," from the Natchez *Mississippi Free Trader*, May 13, 1841, 776.
[105] Ibid., 774.
[106] Secretary of State, *Returns of the Fifth Census, Showing the Number of Free People, the Number of Slaves, the Federal or Representative Number, and the Aggregate of each County of each State of the United States* (Washington: Duff Green, 1832), 22, 24, 36, 40; Benjamin Joseph Klebaner, "American Manumission Laws and the Responsibility for Supporting Slaves," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 63 (1955): 443-453.

*couleur libres* alike. Thousands of inhabitants lost their lives, inciting the massive emigration of those who found their lives in peril, including whites, Saint-Dominguan *gens de couleur libres*, and their slaves. By 1803 many had also fled to Cuba, a society familiarly built on a thriving sugarcane economy, and others made for the Gulf port of New Orleans.[107] While it is difficult to establish the exact number of *gens de couleur* who landed in New Orleans during the first wave, we do know that the population doubled between 1791 and 1806. In 1803 Louisiana's community of color numbered roughly 1,500, and by 1806 that number had reached over 3,300. Napoleon's ambition would yet have those who had not fled to Louisiana at the turn of the eighteenth century on the run, however. With France's invasion of Spain in 1807 Saint-Dominguan refugees who had made a new home in Cuba were expelled from the island, and in this wave a much larger contingent of refugees set their compass for New Orleans. This surge brought as many as 10,000 total French-speaking evacuees to New Orleans' ports – of those, over 3,100 were *libres*, and almost 3,300 were slaves. As a result, Louisiana's free community of color reached over 7,500 by 1810.[108]

Louisiana's government and inhabitants both made the integration of fleeing Saint-Dominguans possible. In 1806 an *Act to prevent the emigration of Free Negroes and Mulattoes into the Territory of Orleans* dictated that "no free negro or mulatto shall emigrate to or settle in this territory," at the penalty of a fine of twenty dollars per week after the expiration of two weeks.[109] However, the territorial legislature tempered this policy, qualifying that the law was not to apply to women of color nor youths of color under fifteen years of age. Thus supported by

[107] C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Allison & Busby, 1980); Nathalie Dessens-Hind, "Les migrants de Saint-Domingue en Louisiane avant la guerre de Sécession: de l'intégration civique à l'influence politique, » *Revue française d'études américaines* 75 (1998); 36. Dessens-Hind claims that as many as 100,000 whites and 60,000 blacks lost their lives in this bloody that span over a decade. Clark, *Strange History*, 39-41. Sterkx, *Free Negro*, 94.

[108] Paul F. Lachance, "The 1809 Immigration of Saint-Dominque Refugees to New Orleans: Reception, Integration and Impact," LHQ 29 (1998); 112.

[109] "An Act to prevent the emigration of Free Negroes and Mulattoes into the Territory of Orleans," in Bullard and Curry, *Statute Laws*, 159.

official goodwill, the mass arriving at New Orleans ports was accepted with "open arms," local inhabitants compassionately not looking to their own interests. Pierre-Louis Berquin-Duvallon described the beneficence with which these desperate travelers were met: "All of the unfortunate refugees, men, women, children, of every state, of ever color, in the first days of their arrival found themselves assured that their primary needs would be accounted for, of lodging, of clothing, of food."[110] Such generosity likely sustained families, like that of Mme. Jeanne Quercy *fcl*, looking to start anew as members of Louisiana's community of color. Indeed, the movements of Quercy's family from the Saint-Dominguan uprising to their return visit to Cuba almost twenty years later is illustrative of the movements of thousands of emigrants. In 1825 the Widow Quercy was issued a passport in New Orleans to travel to Cuba with her five children. Her daughter, thirty year old Henriette, was listed as having been born in Saint-Domingue, Felicité, nineteen, and Jean Louis Bernard, eighteen, born in Cuba. The two youngest, fourteen year old Josephine Marie Noel and eleven year old Marie Francoise, were both born in New Orleans. The acceptance of this family into Louisiana's community of color is illustrative of the affinity and goodwill between the territory's own society and the French speaking plantation cultures of Saint-Domingue and Cuba, despite official rhetoric. Hence, in 1809 when ships unceremoniously arrived with thousands of foreign whites and *gens de couleur* like the Quercy family, Governor Claiborne and local inhabitants welcomed them into the city.[111]

Apart from men of color who whites feared might incite racial turmoil as had occurred in Saint-Domingue, the persons of color that lawmakers sought to bar were, notably, American,

[110] Clark, *Strange History*, 54. Berquin-Duvallon, *Vue de la Colonie Espagnole du Mississipi: Ou des Provinces de Louisiane et Floride Occidentale; en Année 1802, par un Observateur Résident sur les lieux* (Paris: Imprimerie expéditive, 1803), 230.
[111] Clark, *Strange History*, 54, 43. Note that passengers included over 400 free men of color, Lachance holds that as many as 428 free men of color debarked in Louisiana in 1809, 1809 Immigration, 111.

English speaking blacks. Many early Louisianans of both races struggled against any association with the Anglo culture of English speaking Americans. Upon just a short time in New Orleans, Thomas Nichols observed that New Orleans creoles refused to learn English, calling Anglo-Americans "foreigners." He noted that the most aristocratic of rich creoles refused to mix in society with Americans, and estimated that, distance notwithstanding, "New York and Paris are not more different than the French and Yankee portions of New Orleans."[112] In an 1835 bulletin, issued in French, Jean Boze further conveyed the common, native sentiment regarding the growing American influence in the region: "In 1809 there was peace among families and in society but Americans have brought all kinds of death in their wake." By 1830 Boze was regularly lamenting the influx of English speaking slaves, and in 1831 held that over 500 had come into the state within the space of a week, igniting fears that speculators would introduce as many of 15,000 more before the legislature would act against the up-river slave market.[113] Accordingly, the 1805 Act barring the emigration of foreign free people of color was reinforced in 1830, requiring the removal of any free person of color having entered the state after January 25th, 1825. None of the foregoing provisions were to be construed to extend "to any free negro, mulatto, or free person of color," who was a native of the state – whether born slave or free. Essentially, creole *libres* and their Caribbean counterparts arriving prior to 1825, those who shared a common hybrid French culture, were exempt and at liberty to enter and leave the territory as they pleased.[114]

By 1830 Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* had grown to about 16,700; over two times as many as in comparable South Carolina, and making up just under 16% of free inhabitants. Even

[112] Nichols, *Forty Years*, 189.
[113] Boze, f. 258.9-10, 189.8.
[114] "An Act to prevent the immigration of Free Negroes an Mulattoes into the Territory of Orleans, approved April 14, 1807;" "An Act to prevent free persons of color from entering into this State, and for other purposes, approved March 16, 1830," in Bullard and Curry, *Statute Laws*, 159, 160.

Virginia's sizeable free community of color at 47,348 only constituted 7% of free residents in the state.[115] Louisiana's community of color would little fluctuate over the next twenty years, and catalogued records indicate that the number of manumission requests, although varying from year to year, remained consistent into the national period. Indeed, a true decline is difficult to discern with certainty as many historians contend a number of records may have been destroyed to protect whites unwilling to chance familial ties with persons of color becoming publicly known. Even as one set of data shows a sharp decline in manumission petitions around 1839, records from New Orleans' first, second, and third municipalities indicate over six hundred slaves emancipated from 1846 through 1850 – an average rate of over 120 persons freed each year.[116] While surviving data expresses a proportional decline in manumissions after the Spanish period, it is notable that the rates did not decline further absent the benefit of compulsory self-purchase. Evidence suggests that the this can at least partially attributed to whites' consistent participation in the manumission process; over sixty percent of requests initiated between 1813 and 1843 were submitted by whites. Whether due to slaves' own initiative, or as the result of gratitude and affection, manumission worked to increase the free population of color well into the American period. As more and more English speaking Americans moved into the region manumission numbers continued to drop, but it was only when such acts were forbidden by law in 1857 that the official practice came to a

[115] *Fifth Census*, 18, 22, 33.

[116] Petitions. This collection shows a substantial decline in petitions starting in 1839. However, a collection of Slaves emancipated by the New Orleans Councils of Municipalities One, Two, and Three, 1846-1850 enumerates roughly 615 names of those emancipated (in New Orleans alone) in that five year period. New Orleans (La.) Office of the Mayor. Slaves emancipated by the Councils of Municipalities One, Two, and Three, 1846- 1850. Louisiana Division/City Archives, New Orleans Public Library. Further, Midlo Hall's claim that many of these records may have been destroyed to protect families who had passed into white society suggests that even surviving data is not comprehensive. See Midlo Hall, *Africans*, 266. Fitchett likewise held that evidence of this sort is "in many cases completely obliterated, on account of the caste usages, which condemn such connections," 427. E. Horace Fitchett, "The Origin and Growth of the Free Negro Population of Charleston, South Carolina," *The Journal of Negro History* 26 (1941): 421-437.

conclusive end.[117]

Liberal manumission under French custom and Spanish law worked to the benefit of g*ens de couleur libres*. Through personal relationships and significant agency, a number of Louisiana's enslaved population were able to become a part of a large and relatively privileged free class. By the time legal manumission was outlawed, the community measured over 17,000 in number. Prior to this time it appears that, where the law remained ambiguous or silent, a number of bondspersons quietly moved from slavery to freedom. Likewise, where regulations allowed for liberatory action, such action was taken by both people of color and whites. As a result, by the early nineteenth century *libres* had become an established part of Louisiana society, and as this community grew in wealth and knowledge into the nineteenth century they came to normalize the exceptionalism attributed to them.

[117] Of roughly 870 catalogued requests, 336 were initiated by people of color – just under 39%, Petitions.

**The Shape of a Cloud: Antebellum Louisiana's Community of Color**

*What is the state of society in New Orleans? …What is the shape of a cloud? …The great fault of travelers… is to impose first impressions upon themselves and the public for actual states of things.*[1]

~ Benjamin Latrobe ~

The exacting physical environment faced in the colony's uncertain early days created an intimate space of mutual dependence in which Africans were cast as agriculturalists, artisans, soldiers, and lovers. These conditions, in concert with a form of French mercantilism that emphasized assimilation rather than segregation, allowed individual persons of color to present a compelling contradiction to the assumed "natural inferiority of the black race."[2] The meaning of racial difference in antebellum Louisiana, in practice, was malleable, and such variability enabled individuals to be considered apart from the essentialized whole. In turn, this created a space in which the most favorably situated *libres* could prove their fidelity, determination, and capacity, thereby influencing perceptions of the whole. Historian Charles Gayarré described this class according to the most visible among them:

> In New Orleans they became musicians, merchants, and money and real estate brokers…This class was most respectable; they generally married women of their own status, and led lives quiet, dignified and worthy, in homes of ease and comfort… it is always to be remembered that in their contact with white men, they

[1] Latrobe, *Sketches*, 169, 170.
[2] "l'élément de couleur infiniment plus forte… et cette idée se fortifiait singulièrement de croyance en l'infériorité naturelle de la race noir," quoted in Lebeau, *De La Condition*, 9.

> did not assume that creeping posture of debasement — nor did the whites expect it — which has more or less been forced upon them in fiction.

For Gayarré, and many others, the wealthy few epitomized all that was worthy in this society. For all of his praise the historian conceded what he saw to be the ultimate truth; "the whites were superior to them, but they, in their turn, were superior, and infinitely superior, to the blacks, and had as much objection to associating with the blacks on terms of equality as any white man could have to associating with them."[3] Even as a contemporary with an intimate understanding of Louisiana society Gayarré yet took his impression of this community to be the consistent reality. Indeed, much of our understanding about this community has been relayed at the pens of such white observers. However, just as this community existed in a space between white liberties and black bondage, so too do their stories rest somewhere in the twilight between impressions and the "states of things."

The popular imagination about Louisiana's community of color has solidified into an essentialized characterization of an elite, light-skinned community bent on increasingly distancing themselves from the darker subset of their caste. As Kimberly Hanger has held, however, *libres* "cannot be viewed as one monolithic group."[4] The distinction between the lore of Louisiana's *gens de couleur* and what is borne out by surviving evidence is essential to understanding the widespread educational attainment of this caste. Not all were wealthy, and not all were light in aspect, yet many thrived in this society. This chapter takes a deeper look at Louisiana's community of color with a renewed attention to the historical evidence. While impressions are certainly important to apprehending the social context in which *gens de couleur* circulated and thrived, they

[3] Gayarré, quoted in Grace King, *New Orleans*, 345.
[4] Hanger, "Origins," 1.

do not speak for community members' motivations and subsequent choices. This examination first considers the regularity and fluidity of relationships, particularly familial ties, across racial lines. These bonds reveal the deeper connections that ultimately opened pathways of financial and educational opportunity for Louisiana's community of color. Consideration then turns to relationships within the *libre* community. What do manumissions, passports, and other evidence tell us about relationships across phenotype, and particularly about associations between those from differing socioeconomic circumstances, including the enslaved? Finally, what did it mean for *gens de couleur* to be "enlightened by education"? Historical evidence confirms the estimation that *libres* were more than merely literate; they were, broadly speaking, educated.

In 1825 Pierre Crocker *hcl* served as attorney in fact for the estate of Isabelle Beauregard *fcl* in the emancipation of Marie Eglé. That same year Jean Jason, a free Negro man, gave Paul Borée *hcl* power of attorney in his emancipation petition to free African slave, Maguerite.[5] Louisiana's enslaved and free persons of color did not enjoy social or civil equality with whites; however, cases like the above begin to pull back the veil on relationships within Louisiana's community of color. *Gens de couleur libres* were diverse both economically and in aspect, and many near the top of this caste were able and willing to assist those of the lower and darker classes, for whom they ostensibly held great disdain. *Libres* called upon and formally aided each other, many taking on roles as petitioners, sponsors, and mentors. The ongoing and pervasive nature of these alliances over time express a system of social networks that cut across class and racial aspect.

In addition, this freedom of self-determined action ultimately marks the difference between the opportunities available to antebellum Louisiana's persons of color and their counterparts in

[5] Petitions, Emancipation petition of Isabelle Beauregard, Number 37H, 1825; Emancipation petition of Jean Jason, Number 64B, 1825.

other Anglo-American contexts. The absolutism of blood purity and racial difference was as deeply rooted in white French consciousness as it was in those of British extraction. Yet, the French and Spanish acted upon those differences in ways that, unlike the British, allowed persons of color the latitude to represent themselves as respectable. As much as the achievements of this community are a consideration of what liberties were granted them, it is also a question of what impediments were absent for those emancipated in this context. The origin story of Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* is then, in its essence, the story of this community's liberation – an emancipation not just of body, but of circumstance. African blood was destined to stain those who inherited its mark of servitude *à l'infini*, but somewhere between this universal and the realm of everyday action people of color were able to play a greater role in defining what meaning racial difference held.

**Relationships Across Race**

The experience of free people of color in neighboring slave as well as free states illustrates the power of governmental sanction to alternately support or proscribe opportunities for people of color, and civil protection was instrumental in the sustained proliferation of Louisiana's free community of color. Notably, Frank Tannenbaum ignited a long-running debate when he foregrounded the importance of formal structures such as church and state in his explanation of slavery's differing outcomes in French and British contexts. And Louisiana historian Kimberly Hanger has held that material factors such as demographic patterns and economic trends "played a much more substantial role" in the lot of *gens de couleur libres* than did cultural attitudes.[6] As seen from the last chapter, such considerations are apt, and are essential to understanding the

[6] Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 19; Tannenbaum, *Slave*.

Louisiana case. Nonetheless, of equal importance were the actions of individuals in daily practice. Even as government used laws to fashion its vision of an ordered society, inhabitants alternately chose to what extent they would interpret the letter of the law and, thereby, whether to adhere to or shirk governmental prescriptions. Lenient manumission laws did not constitute a mandate that masters gratuitously free their slaves, just as *coartación* relied upon slaves' ability to negotiate their way through the legal process, as well as the faithful execution of the laws by those in power. The high rate of liberatory activity in this gulf region depended upon inhabitants, white and black alike, choosing to take generous advantage of the laws. In those cases where the enslaved did not liberate themselves, the choice to release them was largely owing to feelings of personal connection to those whom the intervening party often reared, willed, sponsored, patronized, and educated. The intimate bonds forged within Louisiana's insular French colonial culture proved just as instrumental to the continued increase and enrichment of *gens de couleur libres*, particularly after formal liberation, as were her legal codes.

Tannenbaum held that "the attitude toward manumission is the crucial element in slavery; it implies the judgment of the moral status of the slave and foreshadows his role in case of freedom."[7] Certainly, high manumission rates tell us something about a society's position regarding the institution of slavery, but it does not necessarily predict its inclination toward the enslaved and, importantly, the emancipated. Ira Berlin found that in the North and upper South ideologically-driven widespread emancipation left freed slaves with little personal connection with nor tangible support from the whites who had unbound them. In fact, increasing white anxiety over the mass of newly freed persons led to a rapid cooling of the goodwill that had liberated northern blacks. In 1821 the Massachusetts legislature expressed its alarm at "the increase of a species of population

[7] Tannenbaum, *Slave*, 69.

which threatened to become both injurious and burdensome," an irony that was not lost on Alexis de Tocqueville who held that "the prejudice against Negroes seems to increase in proportion to their emancipation."[8] With the post-Revolutionary end of slavery the North eliminated a means of clear distinction between whites and blacks, and without a system of slavery by which to readily identify blacks as inferior, whites became more sensitive to their tenuous hold on claims of racial superiority. Laws proscribing opportunities for their enrichment meant that northern free blacks were proportionately less skilled and less educated than their southern counterparts, a "free black peasantry." Historian Leonard Curry has ultimately concluded that "the only development within the black community that would have won [whites'] unqualified approval would have been its disappearance."[9]

Due to the personal connections many Louisiana slaveholders had with select liberated bondspersons, notable attention was paid to their financial stability, and training. Significantly, the early colony's foundational social norms enabled Louisiana's white fathers of means the latitude to ensure a stable foundation for their natural children, as well as for those of lesser means to use their ingenuity and talent in the pursuit of financial gain. The lore of this community's beginnings is rooted in the early mixing of the French with their slaves, a story of concubinage. In 1849 one resident impassively relayed social conditions which, over the course of several decades, awed and titillated many travelers to the region:

> From [the slaves'] first introduction, the females have been to all intents and purposes, the wives of both French and Spanish, and are now the same with the Americans who have taken up abode here. And in this there has been no respect to color, from the dark and sooty black, down to the soft and mellow tinge of the

[8] Quoted in Christopher Hager, *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 11; Berlin, *Slaves*, 181.
[9] Berlin, *Slaves*; quoted in Curry, *Free Black*, 81, 82; quoted in Hager, *Word by Word*, 11.

> beautiful quadroon…. From this heterogeneous mass, which in the beginning was thrown suddenly and promiscuously together, has originated a state of society differing widely from any other part of the civilized world.[10]

Although the resident expressed the regularity of racial mixing over the course of time and irrespective of hue, this history of mixing with the darker slave has given way to the more acceptable story of the pale quadroon mistress "as fair as any European," and having "no symptom of negro blood about her."[11] This prevailing depiction has portrayed such women as unscrupulous, and white men as victims of their feminine seductions.

Widely disseminated decadent tales of agreements known as *plaçage* have perpetuated this portrayal. *Plaçage* was said to have been a "contract" in which a white man would agree to terms under which he would financially support his acquisitive young mistress of color, or *placée*. Popular understanding holds that quadroon balls were organized with the sole purpose of introducing wealthy white male suitors to potential *placées*. In 1841 traveler George William Featherstonhaugh described these affairs as they were recounted to him:

> The Quadroon balls are places to which these young creatures are taken as soon as they have reached womanhood, and there they show their accomplishments in dancing and conversation to the white men, who alone frequent these places. When one of them attracts the attention of an admirer, and he is desirous of forming a liaison with her, he makes a bargain with the mother, agrees to pay her a sum of money… as a fund upon which she may retire when the liaison terminates.[12]

Featherstonhaugh's depiction reveals assumptions about race brought from the Northern ideology;

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[10] Resident, *Stranger than Fiction*, 12-13.
[11] George William Featherstonhaugh, *Excursion Through the Slave States: From Washington on the Potomac to the Frontier of Mexico; With Sketches of Popular Manners and Geological Notices* (London: J. Murray, 1844), 141. For a thorough and incisive study of Louisiana's free women of color see Clark, *Strange History*.
[12] Ibid., 141.

since African blood was untouchable, interracial intimate bonds must only represent a self-interested transaction. Such an image of the licentious and enterprising woman of color proliferated at the pens of many travelers, and such depictions reduced free women of color to objects of moral censure. It is important to recognize the distinction between interracial relationships as portrayed by the resident and as understood from the traveler's perspective. The transactional depiction of intimate bonds formed between Louisiana's whites and its community of color renders the persistence of relationships across these perceived divides incomprehensible.[13] They can only be understood when taken to be insincere and unnatural.

We can see how such a misinterpretation vexed certain contemporaries. Faced with conditions deemed to be against the natural order, Governor Esteban Miró, as a part of his 1786 *Bando de Buen Gobierno*, declared that it was "his intention to proceed with severity against all persons living in concubinage." Rather than legalizing interracial marriage, and thereby permitting these kinds of unions to be legitimized, he held that "the idleness of free negro, mulatto, and quateroon women, resulting from their dependence for a livelihood on incontinence and libertinism" would not be tolerated.[14] Spanish lawmakers' aversion to what one observer deemed the "natural impulse of the human heart" presents a telling contrast to the above resident's use of the term "wives."[15] The choice to invoke such language is suggestive of cultural practices that defied customary definitions of matrimony and kindred adhered to in the rest of North America,

[13] This (mis) understanding has carried over into historical study. Scholars have regularly explained the persistence of cross-racial relationships in terms of uneven gender ratios or as a means for white men to reap the benefits of partnership while effectively remaining bachelors. For example Thomas Ingersoll held that, "Some men remained unmarried and lived openly with a black mate and children; their motivation to create families that could not be legalized is unclear. These men may have sought absolute patriarchy by simply avoiding legal marriage to white women," "Free Blacks," 187. Ingersoll has also held that the prevalence of cross-racial intimate relationships is a myth, which is a questionable conclusion considering the wealth evidence to the contrary.
[14] Gayarré, *History of Louisiana*, quoted in King, *New Orleans*, 179.
[15] Our unnamed informant held that the attachments between Louisiana's earliest residents was an expected matter of course; "to presume otherwise would be to conclude against the experience of every age, as well as against the natural impulse of the human heart," Resident, *Stranger than Fiction*, 35.

or even Europe. Interracial marriage was deemed illegal with the 1724 *Code Noir*, yet relationships that crossed the color line were at times characterized by their long-enduring fidelity.[16] In fact, by regional standards, the concept of being committed to another seems to have been satisfied, in part, by an extralegal state of extended cohabitation. According to our contemporary informant, "there are hundreds of men and women now living together, who have around them large families, and yet were never married." It was only after inheritance laws curtailed the birthright of illegitimate children that many same-race couples, who could lawfully do so, rushed to have the clergy validate their unions.[17] Berquin-Duvallon likewise commented that in the course of over a year in the territory he had observed that, "not thirty marriages at all notable have occurred in New Orleans and for about ten leagues about it," lamenting there being "at least six hundred white girls, of virtuous estate, of marriageable age…, but one marriage [is] effected per year of the fifty that could be made."[18] To the confusion of outside observers, antebellum Louisiana's social conventions ran contrary to a Spanish or American sense of order. Loosened of the stricture of such norms intimate relationships in Louisiana did not reliably adhere to a binary of light and dark.

Legal matrimony not necessarily defining the boundaries of familial ties in early Louisiana society, those who found themselves in illicit relationships across the color line could actually enjoy the quiet existence afforded by general social acceptance.[19] Many men took up with their

[16] Personal correspondence and journals have indicated that, although outside of legal sanction, some interracial "marriages" did take place.
[17] Resident, *Stranger than Fiction*, 35; Articles 217 abolished "all other modes of legitimation except that by marriage." This act was repealed in 1831, enabling parents to legitimate their natural children outside of lawful marriage provided that the natural children were "the issue of parents who might, at the time of conception, have contracted marriage," *Statute Laws*, 151.
[18] Duvallon, *Vue de la colonie*, "people entered into matrimony mainly for economic reasons," 92, 90.
[19] This is a delicate subject that proves problematic as many relationships between white men and women of color, particularly the enslaved, are known to have been the result of coercion and could be characterized as exploitation rather than mutual affection. Women were used, passed around, and just as readily discarded along with the children of such encounters. Enslaved children were regularly sold by their own fathers. This reality is not to be forgotten. At the same time, as Jennifer Spear states the case, "While most métissage relationships were exploitive in nature, we must consider that there was some space, however constrained, for female agency," she finds that the problem lies in

housekeepers, or *ménagères*, a role which, despite the sexual relationships that at times ensued, Emily Clark holds was quite respectable. A *ménagère's* duties often included managing the household budget, shopping, overseeing meal preparation, and supervision of the cleaning and laundry.[20] Indeed, the word itself translates as both housekeeper and housewife, and encounters with this term within the historical record allude to relationships both practical and intimate in nature. As a matter of course, overseer Jean Boze, a man who appeared to have his finger on the pulse of local events for well over two decades, relayed news of various relationships of prominent men and the *ménagères* with whom they openly raised families. In an 1831 letter Boze warmly eulogized Lize Thuet, *ménagère* of a Mr. Sauvinet: "her loss has brought great mourning and regret to her family, as well as to her friends and acquaintances." He agreeably observed that she was known as a "woman of great merit." Interestingly, Boze did not blush to further relay that Sauvinet had already taken up with his second *ménagère*, a creole of Saint-Domingue, by whom he had two children. As many residents and travelers to the region suggested, per local custom the details of such relationships were "not often made a matter of others' business" beyond expected local gossip, and thus those involved were considered "very respectable."[21]

To Spanish lawmakers' and clergy's utter distaste, by the time Louisiana was ceded to

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that the historiography tends to "portray women merely as the objects of men's desires," Jennifer M. Spear, "Colonial Intimacies: Legislating Sex in French Louisiana" *The William and Mary Quarterly* (2003); 79. While remaining attentive to the disparate power dynamics at play in these relationships, for the purposes of this study it is necessary to explore those relationships that provided kinship, and the means for the women and children of color to grow in wealth, status, and security that came to delineate this community as exceptional in the Southern social order. For a further discussion of the varied nature of these relationships see Clark, *Strange History*; Gould, "Urban Slavery;" Mary Niall Mitchell, "'Rosebloom and Pure White,' Or So It Seemed," *American Quarterly* 54 (2002); 369-410; Justin Nystrom, "In My Father's House: Relationships and Identity in an Interracial New Orleans Creole Family, 1845-1875," *LHQ* 49 (2008); 287-313; Schafer, "Notorious Concubinage;" Schweninger, "Fragile Nature of Freedom."

[20] Clark, *Strange History*, 64.

[21] *Ménagère* literally translates to both housewife and housekeeper, depending on the context. "et sa perte a porté un grand deuil a sa famille qui la regrette beaucoup, ainsi que ses amis et ses connaissances comme une femme d'un grand mérite," Boze, 188.4, 1831. Resident, *Stranger than Fiction*, 35, 41-42.

Spain in 1763, "every page of the baptismal register contained at least one entry accompanied by the phrase *d'un père inconnu* (father unknown)."[22] We must understand many of these cross-racial relationships to have been the result of uneven power dynamics that facilitated the abusive manipulation of slaves and free women of color. At the same time, evidence indicates not uncommon circumstances in which actions were driven by deeper attachment and genuine feeling. Rather than delineating their choices within the realm of legal sanction some Louisiana inhabitants instead defined their options within the parameters of their own conscience and desires. In 1800, with the death of the last of any heirs who might have laid claim to his property upon his own passing, Antoine Simien rendered his 1791 succession null. In its stead he had a testament drafted bestowing his wealth to his unsanctioned family. Worth citing at length, the will stated:

> He gives and bequeaths to whoever claims the right of his succession, the least possible, and only what… he is obliged, for the validity of his will… He declares that he has four natural mulatto children which he has had with a free negresse, named Marie, to whom he has granted freedom, these have been baptized free under his name and are Louis, about 11 years, George, about 6 or 7 years, Baptist 4 or 5 years, and Francis Simien, about 1 year old, and though they are not the issue of a valid marriage, that they have nevertheless in him the same heart, same love of a true father; wishing to give them a visible proof of his love… He declares that he names and institutes the said Louis, George, Baptiste, and Francis Simiens, his natural sons without excluding those that may yet be born of said negresse Marie, their mother by him, and whom he will recognize as his only universal heirs.

Simien's behest continues with no-uncertain language that Marie should serve as executrix of his will, his placing "all his confidence in her."[23] As a legal document, Simien's testament illustrates

[22] Bell, "French Religious," 7.
[23] Will of Antoine Simien (copy), 1800 September 4, box 77, f. 4, 1800, A.P. Tureaud papers, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

how some legitimizing structures were utilized even as others, such as marriage, were forgone.

Indeed, the acknowledgement by white men of their mixed-race offspring was a matter of regular comment by outsiders. Bishop Luis Peñalver y Cárdenas famously remarked on the wide acceptance of cross-racial relationships in the Louisiana territory, dismayed that men did not "blush at carrying the illegitimate issue they have by [these unions] to be recorded in the parochial registries."[24] What is particularly notable about this succession, however, is the emotive language used by Simien. Taking advantage of the legal authority of his last will and testament to aver his love and affection for his chosen family, he was also able to defy the illegitimacy of his relationship with Marie. Despite the inability to confirm his desires in legal marriage, he was able to legitimize his family's deeper bonds through legal means. Unlike many testaments of this sort, Simien confirmed the ongoing nature of his commitment to Marie and their family with his inclusion of any as-yet unborn children he would have with her. Eighteen years later, living with her four sons in the Opelousas district, Marie Simien was cited by the Saint Landry tax rolls as owning four parcels of land totaling almost 8,000 acres. She ultimately established her son George on an 800 acre plantation in the region. While law banning interracial marriage delineated the extent to which some could live out their affections, affection at times led actors to circumvent statutory precepts.[25]

Given the broad acceptance of such relationships, evidence that might divulge the feelings of the parties involved is rarely as forthcoming as in the case of Antoine and Marie Simien. Apart from court records or scandal, most who chose cross-racial partnerships have only left behind fleeting clues as to the nature of their relationships. In a letter written by Jean Boze to his absentee employer in 1831 he confides his oversight in having forgotten to tell of Maurice Abat who had

[24] Quoted in Spear, "Colonial Intimacies," 99.
[25] Brasseaux et al, *Creoles of color*, 42. See Clark, *Strange History.*

left for France with his *ménagère*, Emerile Giraudeau: "Mr. Maurice Abat, the oldest of Antoine, left for France many months ago with his *ménagère*, mother of two children and daughter of Mr. Giraudeau, who was serving as a judge on Royal street when we arrived in the city." Boze held that Abat's purported intention was, "to marry her when they have arrived in that state of freedom." Mayoral passport records appear to support Boze's account as more than loose gossip. In 1831 a passport was issued for Maurice Abat to travel to Nantes with "a negresse slave of twenty-eight years as well as an infant of fifteen months."[26] Abat was not the only amorous suitor to embark for France in order to obtain legal validation of his commitment. Former teacher and textbook writer Victor Cherbonnier likewise made leave for Paris with his mistress Modèste Fouchet, the daughter of General Lacoste. The couple's purpose was to marry and legitimize their four children.[27]

Beyond such evidence, we can only speculate as to what depth of feeling might have compelled young lovers to cross the Atlantic seeking legal confirmation of their unions. That these couples were aware that France's ban on interracial marriage, enacted in 1778, had fallen into disuse not long thereafter reveals that they defined their opportunities within a social and geographical context that extended beyond Louisiana's borders.[28] In fact, despite legislation to the contrary, most creole Louisianans lived by social norms far more resonant with France and the Caribbean than with the nation of which they had become a part. The accounts of elopements with free and enslaved women of color depicted such actions as no more, and at times less, scandalous

[26] Boze, 1831, f. 180.7, 183.5; New Orleans (La.) Office of the Mayor. Louisiana Division/City Archives, New Orleans Public Library. Record book of licenses, bakers' declarations, and statements of public works, 1812, and passports, 1818-1831. Louisiana Division/City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, 43 (hereafter cited as Passports).

[27] "On dit aussi que Charbonnier ci devant instituteur dans cette ville se mariera arrive qu'il sera en france après son séjour au nord, avec modeste fouchet… et légitimer par ce saissement leur nombreuse famille," Boze, 1831, f. 180.7-8, 164.2.

[28] Jennifer Heuer, "The One-Drop Rule in Reverse? Interracial Marriages in Napoleonic and Restoration France," *Law and History Review* 27 (2009): 515-548.

than gossip involving only white parties.[29] Unlike the attitudes that animated the Spanish Governor and clergy's disapproval, the lines written about these attachments certainly painted the affairs as clandestine, but they betrayed no strict disapproval.

It is difficult to determine why such relationships persisted well after the white male to female ratio reached relative parity beyond attributing it to the so-called "natural impulse of the human heart." What is evident is that the intimate bonds between more affluent white men and women of color differentiated the ensuing prospects of a number of Louisiana's large mixed-race community from those of other North American free blacks. Such relationships proved instrumental not only to the liberation of their mistresses, at times life-partners, but of their progeny as well. Once freed, Louisiana's *gens de couleur* often enjoyed continued support. The importance of this distinction cannot be overstated as patrimonial benevolence was foundational to the social acceptance, as well as the economic and educational attainment of Louisiana's community of color. Although Thomas Ingersoll found that a relatively low number of manumission petitions were sponsored by white men between 1718 and 1812, racial intermixture played a decidedly important role in the wealth and flourishing of Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres*. Olmstead relayed the common circumstance of these families as it had been described to him: many "form so strong attachments, that the relation is never discontinued… These men leave their estate, at the death, to their children, to whom they may have previously given every advantage of education they could command."[30] Still, civil law presented obstacles to the succession of wealth in these unsanctioned families. While Spanish laws broadened opportunity for emancipation, under

[29] Jean Boze seems to have taken great pride in being abreast of the latest news within community, from illness and death to infidelity and duels. His attention to the matters of people of color were often recounted with less judgment than the intrigues of the white community.

[30] According to the 1810 census of the Territory of Orleans "Twenty-four of forty white-dominated households (60 percent) contained no white women," Brasseaux et al, *Creoles*, 8; Olmstead, *Cotton Kingdom*, 305.

Spanish codes mistresses could only inherit up to 10% of their partner's wealth, and natural children no more than 25%.[31] In 1808 this increased moderately, allowing natural children to inherit as much as three-quarters of their father's estate, provided the absence of any surviving relatives nearer than cousins. Natural children's share decreased the more closely connected were surviving, white relatives, and by 1825 natural children could inherit no more than one-third of their father's property if any legitimate relative, no matter how remote, could lay claim to the decedent's wealth.[32]

In the face of these impediments, some white fathers went to great lengths in order to sidestep succession laws and ensure the financial security of their children. Making his home with free woman of color Charlotte Wiltz, Jean Pierre Cazelar was careful to authenticate paternity of their children, ensuring that they would inherit his substantial estate. Emily Clark cites that Cazelar took pains to have his name included in the body of the baptismal records, and made certain to sign the register for each of his children.[33] Cazelar's mixed-race family was well-known in the community, and in 1836 Jean Boze relayed that at seventy-two wealthy sugar planter Pierre Cazelar had passed. Boze praised Cazelar's widely recognized integrity and reported: "it is said that his fortune has been willed to his numerous colored progeny."[34] Notably, although Cazelar's last written will, penned in 1829, named his children as his universal heirs, upon his death in 1836 a white man, Emile Sanet, was his sole beneficiary. On the surface this final act appears duplicitous, however, Clark explains that Sanet was also the life partner of Cazelar's natural daughter, Marie Louise. In this final act Cazelar ensured that his estate would not be subject to

[31] Ingersoll, "Free Blacks," 197.
[32] Clark, *Strange History*, 110.
[33] Clark, *Strange History*, 106-108.
[34] "On dit que la fortune qu'il laisse passera par son testament à ses nombre enfans naturels de couleur," Boze, 1836, f. 265.9.

proscriptive inheritance laws that would have disenfranchised his children of color. According to the patriarch's wishes, Sanet dutifully worked to distribute Jean Pierre Cazelar's wealth to his children.[35] The elder Cazelar's shrewd planning appears to have been successful; a generation after his death, the assets of twenty-seven year old Pierre Cazelar, planter and free person of color, were estimated at a substantial $30,000.[36] It is apparent that, like many white men of means who developed romantic bonds across racial lines, the senior Cazelar was not remiss in seeing to the future comfort of his chosen family.

Such maneuvers were not always successful due to the frequent emergence of white relatives anxious to contest any right family of color may have had to a decedent's wealth, thereby claiming it for themselves. Instead, some found it more prudent to manage their final wishes while still living; these men arranged for their wealth to be transferred to their preferred beneficiaries through gift or sale. In 1839, using language often suggestive of intimate familiarity, Josias Gray settled his purported debt to Ann Maria by giving her fifteen slaves, worth the sum of $13,000. Gray attested that the gift was granted, "for and in consideration of services rendered him… as, and in the capacity of a House Keeper since her emancipation." Gray further agreed to bind himself and his heirs, "to pay and release any mortgage or mortgages" that would exist against the value of the fifteen slaves. In doing so, he ensured that the gift could not later be revoked by his heirs to cover any obligations owed by his estate – a loophole that reversed many such gifts and even remanded a number of emancipated slaves to bondage.[37]

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[35] Clark, *Strange History*, 108-110.
[36] Blassingame Census.
[37] Josias Gray slave bill of sale, 1839 July 11, Slavery Documents Collection, Manuscripts Collection 503, Louisiana Research Collection, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA 70118. In Louisiana slaves were considered to be mortgage-able property. Judith K. Schafer explains that manumission was considered a monetary donation to the slave. If the value of a slave exceeded the value of the estate, he or she could not be freed without the consent of the heirs. See Schafer, "Notorious Concubinage."

In like manner, rather than negotiate thorny inheritance laws that would yet have left uncertainty as to whether his last will would provide for his family as he desired, it appears that Barthelemy MaCarty transferred much of his wealth to their possession before his death. At his passing in 1832 at the age of 54, MaCarty was survived by his *ménagère*, Cécé McCarty, and their two sons. In relaying the news of MaCarty's unexpected death, Jean Boze held that, "they say he had given to [Cécé] some properties worth 50,000 gourdes; and he was preparing to go with her to France with the rest of his fortune of about 80,000 gourdes, totaling 130,000 in all." Again, Boze had apparently been privy to sound information; two years before the loss of her partner Cécée McCarty was listed as New Orleans' largest slaveholder of color, owning thirty-two bondsmen and women.[38] Further, around the time of their father's death the young MaCarty boys were said to be attending school in the North where they could receive a comprehensive education, and it was favorably stated that they were "very good" students there.[39] As with the decision to flout legitimizing structures in their choice of partner and family, some white fathers also found ways to evade legal structures in order to ensure that, in death, their legacies would continue with those with whom they had made their lives.

It is important to recognize that, while a great deal of wealth was introduced into Louisiana's community of color through the behests of affluent white fathers, such familial ties and support were not reserved only for the wealthy. It could be held that the economic status of

[38] Boze, 1832, f. 203.1. Note: 1830 Haitian gourde = $28.96, making Cécé MaCarty's share over $1.4 million in contemporary U.S. Currency, http://u16201083.onlinehome-server.com/currency-converter/haiti-gourde-htg_usd-us-dollar.htm/1830; Carter G. Woodson, *Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830, Together with Absentee Ownership of Slaves in the United States in 1830* (Washington, D. C.: The Association for the study of Negro life and history, 1924), 11. See also Rousseve, *Negro*, 45. Note that this was only the largest number of slaves owned by a free person of color within New Orleans proper – Cécée McCarty was noted as living in a suburb of the city. Some *gens de couleur* living on plantations outside of New Orleans owned as many as seventy-five slaves.
[39] Woodson, *Free Negro Owners*, 11. "deux garçons âgés… 17 a 18 ans qui se trouvent dans une collège du nord pour y recevoir une éducation soignée," Boze, 1832, f. 203.1; "ses deux enfans naturels macarty très bien élèves dans les collèges du nord un héritage qui est encore d'une grande valeur," Boze, 1834, f. 238.6.

these white men provided social cover for their romantic indulgences, forbearance which might not have been afforded lower classes. However, the historical record expresses an intricate web of interpersonal ties that traversed not only color, but class. For instance, Judith K. Schafer has cited several instances in which heirs, plausibly mistresses and the children of their liberators, were denied their bequests, or even freedom, due to the insufficiency of the decedent's estate.[40]

Additionally, in several cases men employed as teachers, an occupation which was rarely accompanied by wealth, were said to have taken up with women of color. Saint-Dominguan native Louis Duhart set up house with Saint-Dominguan refugee Marie Francois Bayot *fcl* and was listed as a teacher in the city of New Orleans in 1811 and again in 1822. Their sons Pierre and Alfred subsequently established themselves as key figures in Louisiana's community of color, and Alfred came to take an active role in the education of less affluent families.[41] When Jean Boze inquired about one M. Foch, presumably a native of France, he was informed that Foch had received a favorable appointment as an instructor, and that he had taken up with demoiselle Brun, his *ménagère* with whom he had a large family. Additionally, Charles J. Bourgeois served as sponsor for his son Pierre Jerome's *hcl* apprenticeship in 1818, and four years later was listed as a teacher in the city of New Orleans. Pierre Cherbonnier, who had absconded with his *ménagère*, had worked for some time as an educator and was fortunate to have made a great deal of money by writing a well-received textbook before leaving for France.[42] Not necessarily circulating within the region's elite circles, these men and their chosen families were deemed respectable to the extent that they were entrusted with the cultivation of young minds. More importantly, regardless of the means

[40] Schafer, "Notorious Concubinage."
[41] Colleen Fitzpatrick, 1822 New Orleans City Directory, Orleans Parish, LA, http://usgwarchives.net/copyright.htm (hereafter cited as 1822 Directory); Rebecca J. Scott, Jean M Hébrard, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 73-73.
[42] Boze, 1828, f. 135; 1831, f. 180.7-8; Pierre Jerome with Jean Ostin sponsored by Charles Joachim Bourgeois, V. 3, No. 64, 1818, Indentures.

available to these educators, it is likely that their children received some academic benefit in households with educated fathers.

Apprenticeship contracts further reveal the complexity of interracial bonds outside of the affluent class as occupational training served to provide saleable skills for those who might not rely on a father's wealth for future security. It was not uncommon to see white fathers sponsoring their sons in respected trades ranging from bricklayer to shoemaker. In fact, of over 500 indentures nearly one-fifth were openly sponsored by such men.[43] In one notable case both parents, Anette Denan *fcl* and Nicholas Rousseau, both stood before the notary as sponsors for their son, Augustin Rousseau. In 1836 Etienne Denan apprenticed his son, Louis Isere, to learn the trade of cigar maker. The contract further stipulated, "It is understood between the parties that in the case that Etienne Denan should part for France, he will have the privilege of retiring the above said apprentice to take with him."[44] This simple provision tells of a paternal relationship that extended beyond mere obligation; Denan's purpose here was not to free himself in relinquishing his son to the care of a master. In fact, it is possible that Denan availed himself of this caveat as neither he nor Isere appear in later census records.

Although Isere and Denan's tenure in New Orleans may have been fleeting, most such families remained in, and contributed to, the community. A number of white fathers openly attended to their sons' preparation for economic independence without apparent fear of public condemnation. In 1810 Nicolas Gravier was recorded as the head of a household of ten in which he was the only white inhabitant, and six years later Gravier apprenticed his sons Joseph and Louis (both young men of color) to be sailmakers. In 1831 the senior Gravier again stood before a notary,

[43] Of 526 indentures examined, roughly 87 were sponsored by fathers with no racial designation and not confirmed to be men of color – a rate of about 16.5%.
[44] Louis Isere with M. Fourçade sponsored by Etienne Denan, V. 5, No. 408, 1836, Indentures.

sponsoring son Bernard Gravier *hcl* to learn to be a joiner and carpenter. At the same time, as early as 1822, Nicholas Gravier was occupied as a prominently located goldsmith and spectacle maker, and in 1832 was still employed as such while sharing his home at 199 Bourbon Street with son Joseph.[45] Evidently, Gravier's acknowledgment and support of his family of color did not compromise the elder's business relationships in New Orleans society. Likewise, in 1829 commissary of police Fortuné Penne apprenticed his son Fortuné Penne *fils* to be a bricklayer, and in 1830 sponsored his son Charles Penne to be the same. By 1832 the senior Penne had been promoted to the position of Captain of the City Guard.[46] It appears that white men's open acknowledgement of, and aid to, their relations of color were not matters of secrecy or reproach.

Additionally, some apprentices were supported by community members, neither identified as blood relations nor as persons of color, who had yet taken on some responsibility for these young *gens de couleur*. Fourteen year old Romain, eighteen year old Jean Denis, and ten-year old Joseph Daceny were sponsored by men listed as their benefactors, while eight more young men were attended by sponsors listed as either godparent or tutor, yet not identified as a persons of

[45] Joseph and Louis Gravier with François Skinner sponsored by Nicolas Gravier, V. 2, No. 73, 1816 August 5; Bernard Gravier with Pierre Tejado sponsored by Nicolas Guerin, V. 5, No. 313, 1831, Indentures. Note: Gravier is mis-catalogued as "Guerin;" however, the name and signature on Bernard Gravier's indenture is of the same Nicholas Gravier as on the indentures of his two brothers. Colleen Fitzpatrick, 1832 New Orleans City Directory, Orleans Parish, LA, http://usgwarchives.net/la/lafiles.htm (hereafter cited as 1832 Directory); 1822 Directory. Note: The 1810 Federal Census lists a "Gravier, *as" as the only white inhabitant in a household of ten, Carol Walker, Orleans, LA 1810 Federal Census, http://www.rootsweb.org/census.

[46] Fortune Penne Jr. with Joachim Courcelle sponsored by Fortune Penne, V. 4, No. 272, 1829; Charles Penne with Correjolles and Chaigneau sponsored by Fortune Penne, V. 4, No. 292, 1830, Indentures. 1824 and 1832 New Orleans City directory list Fortune Josephe Penne as commissary of police and Captain of the City Guard respectively. Trisha Pohlmann, Linda Dean, and Colleen Fitzpatrick, 1824 New Orleans City Directory, Orleans Parish, http://usgwarchives.net/la/lafiles.htm; 1832 Directory. *Fils* translates as son or Jr. It also appears that famous creole and politician Bernard Marigny openly had a son with a free woman of color. In an 1815 contract, although sponsored by his mother Marie Soulet, the agreement noted that Hyppolite Jean Marigny was the natural son of Mr. Marigny. Indentures, Hypolite Jean Marigny with John Goldenbow sponsored by Marie Soulet, V. 2, No. 55, 1815, Indentures; Grace Elizabeth King, *Creole families of New Orleans* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921).

color.[47] Interestingly, in 1834, the same year that the senior Moliere Duvernay petitioned for the manumission of his children, newly emancipated fifteen year old Molier was apprenticed to be a cigar maker along with Antoine Duvernay and a *griffe* slave named John. The three were sponsored by Mathieu Lartet and his wife Aimee Duvernay; and, while all three young men were indicated as persons of color, neither M. nor Mme. Lartet were noted as such.[48] Absent further evidence it is difficult to speculate as to the relationships that put the two free young men under the care of this couple. What was Aimee Duvernay's relationship to the senior Molliere Duvernay? Why was Molier *fils* not sponsored by his father? Facing such enigmas within the historical record Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's assertion that, "racial attitudes among all social groups in Louisiana were quite open" becomes deeply evident.[49] In antebellum Louisiana race was an inconsistent determinant in predicting an individual's networks and prospects. Discriminatory attitudes toward people of color appear to have been mitigated by the personal relationships some had with community members willing and capable of lending aid – white and black alike.

## The Community of Color

Certainly Louisiana's community of color was not immune to the contradictions inherent to a society built upon chattel slavery. The fact that *gens de couleur libres* were known to have owned slaves at the same time as many were themselves emancipated slaves, and likely related to those still bound, complicates any simple understanding of the racial dynamics within this community. Indeed, some *gens de couleur* were large plantation owners who openly exploited

[47] Indentures, Romain with Louis Simon sponsored by Mare Sabaros, V. 1, No. 30, 1811; Jean Denis with Thomas Willard sponsored by Alexandre Levasseur, V. 2, No. 56, 1816; Joseph Daceny with Joseph Joly sponsored by Louis Duclos, Vo. 2, No. 77, 1816.
[48] Moliere Duvernay, John, and Antoine Duvernay with Jean Glaudin sponsored by Aimee Duvernay and Mathieu Lartet, V. 5, No. 376, 1834, Indentures. Notably, there was neither any Lartet or Duvernay listed in Carter G. Woodson's list of Free Negro Slave Owners taken from the 1830 census; *Free Negro Owners.*
[49] Midlo Hall, *Africans*, 241.

slave labor for their own financial gain. Members of this affluent cohort have been depicted as particularly callous and hard-driving masters. Apprising Frederick Law Olmstead of the hardness and cruelty of black slave masters, one Louisiana slave opined that he "wouldn't be sold to a coloured master for anything," at the prospect exclaiming, "I'd drown myself!"[50] Such a depiction certainly presents a perplexing reality. However, such a portrayal is not necessarily representative of the free community as a whole. According to Carter G. Woodson's catalogue of *Free Negro Slave Owners* taken from the 1830 Federal Census, only about sixty households of color held over half of the slaves in this category – a minimal number in comparison to the overall population of almost 17,000 *libres* in the region at the time.[51] In fact, much of this human property was consolidated within the estates of a few wealthy families. For instance, the Metoyers of Natchitoches counted thirteen family members collectively owning a total of 215 slaves, 153 bondspersons belonging to the four largest slaveholders of this clan. Likewise, the Lenormand family of St. Martinsville Parish owned 89 slaves between four family members. Overall, Loren Schweninger has found that forty-three of Louisiana's free people of color owned over 1,300 slaves, or one-fifth of all black-owned slaves in the lower South.

Such data led Woodson to conclude that the majority of the black slave owners "were such from the point of view of philanthropy," and left it up to students to determine for themselves, based upon the ratio of slaves to free persons in a household, whether exploitation or benevolence motivated these masters.[52] Although, it can be reasonably surmised that those owning more than twenty slaves were likely not benevolent masters, that is, treating enslaved family members or

[50] Olmstead, *Cotton Kingdom*, 336-337.
[51] Sixty-six households claimed 10 or more slaves, totaling just over 1,400 total slaves. Inclusive of the over 350 households claiming at least one slave the total came to under 2,800, Woodson, *Free Negro Owners.*
[52] Transcribed in Woodson as Meytoyier. Woodson, *Free Negro Owners*, v, viii; Schweninger, "Socioeconomic," 53.

loved ones as free until such time as they could be formally liberated, this group was relatively small. The fact that people of color benefited from the forced labor of those with whom they shared the ineffaceable mark of servitude is significant, but exploitive slave ownership does not appear to have been prolific enough to be altogether definitive of Louisiana's free community of color. Only about fifty households claimed between ten and twenty slaves, and the rest of the sizeable list included those who had fewer than ten slaves, the bulk of whom owned less than five. Clearly, apart from the largest slaveholders it is difficult to draw many conclusions based upon the numbers alone; however, we can take one case as instructive. The record reveals that Moliere of St. Charles headed a household of fourteen, ten of whom were slaves. This was a number large enough to suggest of his using these bondspersons for his own gain. Yet four years later Moliere Duvernay petitioned to free at least three of those slaves, his children. The remainder may have been held as chattel, but, considering that manumission ordinances and financial means played a role in slowing the rate at which slaves could be released, it cannot be taken as a matter of course that the remainder were held as such. Those who owned more than a few slaves were not necessarily complicit participants in the slave economy.[53]

The distinction between slave ownership as exploitative or benevolent is important as *libres* writ large have been characterized by an aspiration to whiteness, denigrating darker complected free blacks and the enslaved. *Gens de couleur libres* have come to be known as a predominantly light-skinned and wealthy class, and what has been attributed to the affluent mixed-

[53] Ibid; Emancipation petition of Mollier Duvernay, Number 20B, 1834 Petitions. One factor that complicated the manumission of younger, and potentially lighter, generations was an 1807 statute preventing the emancipation of slaves under the age of thirty, and requiring a $1,000 bond for any who were under that age. This ordinance was meant to discourage concubinage with slave women by restricting white fathers' ability to liberate their children. Although many petitions for the release of those under the age of thirty continued, this stipulation likely delayed the manumission of a number of mixed-race children. "An Act to regulate the condition and forms of the emancipation of slaves," approved March 9, 1807, in Bullard and Curry, *Statute Laws*.

race sect has become representative of this class as a whole. Contemporary F.M. Perrin Dulac did little to veil his contempt for this element of Louisiana society, deeming them "evil, vindictive, treacherous, and the enemies… of the blacks whom they despise." More moderate in his depiction, one historian authoritatively claimed that the "management of slaves was merely one facet of the free blacks' economic and cultural mimicry of white planters."[54] Both attributions appear to rely on little support from the historical record, which provides evidence that unsettles any simplistic understanding of the relationships across Louisiana's large and diverse community of color. As Virignia L. Gould has held, *gens de couleur* "were tied together by traditions that had been brought from Africa and by others that were created in the hostile environment of Louisiana. They also forged real and fictive kinship networks that criss-crossed the city and reached into the plantation regions around the city."[55] Despite the region's rapidly growing free caste, slavery remained dominant – as of 1830 the number of enslaved sat just under 110,000, outnumbering the entire free population by over 3,000.[56] This reality left many *gens de couleur* with real kinship ties to the enslaved, bonds they regularly acknowledged. The earliest patriarchs and matriarchs of this caste would have possessed the greatest amount of African blood; as such, these elders freed, and were freed by, their often lighter children and grandchildren. For example, Luce Dombard appealed for the emancipation of her mother Sophia in 1827. Sophia was described as a fifty year old "negro woman," as was Carmelite Laforestriere's mother, Bonne, liberated in 1829. Wishing to "reward" fifty-two year old Hypolite, the grandmother of his three children, in1838 Eugene Ladner petitioned for her manumission. Ladner attested that Hypolite "at all times attended to them and

[54] Duvallon portrayed mulattoes as debauched idlers, "drunkards, liars , vain, insolent and cowardly," *Vue de la colonie*, 253; F. M. Perrin Du Lac quoted in Everett, "Free Persons," 38; Brasseaux et. al, *Creoles*, 73.
[55] Gould, "Urban Slavery," 309.
[56] *Fifth Census*, 33. The number of total free inhabitants was 106,151, and the enslaved population numbered 109,588.

to [the] petitioner when sick with the greatest solicitude."[57] While testament to her faithful service was a necessary formality, the elder's maternal bonds to those for whom she cared certainly must have had some bearing upon her attentiveness and subsequent liberation. Such attachment led Genevieve Devel to appeal for the emancipation of her mother, Damarisse Devel in 1829. In turn Damarisse Devel submitted an 1834 request for release of five more family members – her children Memi and Hortense, as well as Hortense's three children.[58]

The frequency with which the emancipated subsequently worked to formally manumit others is telling of the relationships maintained between the liberated and the enslaved. Also telling are indications that some bondspersons may have been treated as free despite official status. In an 1823 voyage to Santiago de Cuba the Widow Dufour accompanied by three slaves, two being thirty-eight year old Pierre Dufour and fourteen year old Louise Dufour. By 1838 Pierre Dufour had apparently gained his freedom, and in a role reversal made three separate manumission requests: one for his daughter Eliza, one for a forty-three year old woman named Thereze, and a petition for his brother, Louis Baudoin. Dufour claimed to have purchased Baudoin in 1833, and maintained that from that point to the time of petition in 1838, "the said Louis Baudoin has been treated by your petitioner and his family as being free," but that Dufour had "neglected to fulfill the formalities prescribed by law for his manumission."[59] It is likely that Baudoin's presumptive freedom extended into his dealings with the larger community. Absent any imminent need or threat, it is probable that *gens de couleur* were granted the flexibility to manumit as means and circumstance allowed. In his last act Joseph Prieto *hcl* freed no less than eight bondspersons, and

[57] Emancipation petition of Luce Dombard, Number 136, 1817; Emancipation petition of Carmelite Laforestriere, Number 109D, 1829; Emancipation petition of Eugene Ladner, Number 44C, 1838, Petitions.
[58] Emancipation petition of Genevieve Devel, Number 11A, 1829; Emancipation petition of Damarisse Devel, Number 19K, 1834, Petitions.
[59] Passports; Emancipation petition of Pierre Dufour, Number 4F, 1838; Emancipation petition of Pierre and Suzi Dufour, Number 44A, 1838, Petitions.

Antoine Benjamin *hcl* freed at least seven people from 1814 to 1835, only two of which were indicated as his relations. Instead of distancing themselves from the enslaved, many *libres* consistently vied for the liberation of friends and family members, initiating over 300 manumission requests between 1813 and 1843, a significant number of which entreated for the release of multiple persons.[60]

Interestingly, the favorable reputations of prominent *gens de couleur* proved instrumental in the quest to emancipate loved ones. In 1834 Demba Roumage, described as a free Negro man, petitioned for the liberty of his ten year old daughter, Attile. Having bought her from Augustin Liotaud, one of the provisions in the deed of sale was to grant Atille her freedom as soon as permissible. M. Roumage reasoned that due to his obligation, and the scourge ravaging the city "to which he could fall a victim and leave his daughter a slave," he was motivated to grant Atille her freedom. What is most notable about this petition, however, is the appended statement of support:

> *We undersigned inhabitants of Orleans Parish certify to know the free negro Demba Roumage who is a man of excellent conduct, industrious, and respectful in the company of whites. He is capable of properly raising his daughter Atille who shows promise of a good disposition.*

This testament was followed by the signatures of a number of noteworthy *libres* of elevated economic and social standing, including Forstall, Durel, Wiltz, Deléry and several others – over twenty supporters in all.[61] Such a resounding endorsement for a man who, as a "negro," was presumably more black than white, seriously complicates claims that *gens de couleur libres*' "celebration of white values and disdain for the black masses had a powerful influence on all free

[60] Petitions.
[61] Emancipation petition of Demba Roumage, Number 16E, 1834, Petitions. Note: the scourge Roumage cites was likely Yellow Fever, which was known to plague the city at regular intervals for many decades.

Negroes." Moreover, it calls into question whether favorably situated community members' "self-imposed isolation deprived the free Negro caste of many potential leaders."[62] These outstanding members of New Orleans' community of color openly exercised their leadership in attesting to the excellent conduct of one of their own, thereby reinforcing a favorable image of the community as a whole.

The relationships that prominent free people of color maintained with the enslaved, and their continued efforts to liberate them, challenges the notion that "Negroes accepted the concept of the goodness, purity, and sanctity of whiteness and the degradation of blackness."[63] Indeed, resignation was not a trait that could be easily ascribed to the community of color's most accomplished citizens. Affluent businessman Norbert Soulié's 1829 petition to free four year old Charles was initially denied as the child was deemed too young, and because the request was not signed by Soulié himself. After appearing before the police jury to explain that his aim in emancipating the boy was to also gain the release of Charles' mother, as her owner might thereby be compelled to part with her, the governing body consented. However, it was stipulated that Soulié and his co-petitioner Mirtile Courcelle offer bond of $1,000 as security for the boy's good behavior, and further that he be "educated and maintained by the appearers" until he became of age. The petitioners were to "provide the said Charles with his board & lodging up to his majority & learn him to read and write [and to] learn him a trade, so that the said negro boy may provide for his living."[64] All provisions to which the two petitioners readily agreed. That the police jury

[62] Berlin, *Slaves*, 283.
[63] Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, 21.
[64] Emancipation petition of Norbert Soulié, Number 166, 1829, Petitions. Free Men of Color, Albin and Bernard Soulié, were builders and commission merchants in New Orleans. Prominent men of business, they owned extensive properties and served as creditors "in considerable sums to such eminent New Orleanians as Leonidas Polk, Episcopal Bishop of Louisiana." In March of 1846 state taxes were paid on Soulié properties valued at $90,200. Soulié Family Ledgers, 1843-1880, HNOC.

mandated this young boy be formally educated and taught a trade is telling of not only the opportunity open to *libres*, but what was expected of them as members of Louisiana society. Free persons of color were not to merely toil, but to act as productive and learned contributors to the community. Records do not indicate whether Soulié was successful in winning freedom for Charles' mother, but these prominent men apparently did not hesitate to use their wealth and influence toward the increase of an educated and self-sufficient free population.

Without photographic evidence we cannot with our own eyes definitively determine to what degree skin color played a role in status and opportunity within Louisiana's community of color. Population numbers by 1850 prove the regularity of cross-racial liaisons that produced a primarily mixed-race free community, blood ties to whites providing more avenues to freedom for mistresses and their children.[65] However, Hirsch and Logsdon have also pointed out that "the population's primary divisions were rooted in ethnocultural differences… New Orleans Franco-Africans, whatever the aristocratic notions of some, did not neatly categorized themselves by color."[66] Records indicate that Louisiana's community of color was, in fact, phenotypically diverse. Freshly arrived in New Orleans, Benjamin Latrobe described the scene that greeted him on the levee, marveling at the collection of "white men and women, and of all hues of brown, and of all classes of faces, from round Yankees to grizzly and lean Spaniards, black negroes and negresses… mulattoes curly and straight-haired, quadroons of all shades, long hair and frizzled." Indeed, Latrobe's depiction of the bustling city typified the reaction of visitors unfamiliar with such racial variety. Travelers could hardly render an account of the region without commenting on

[65] In 1850 the free Mulatto population in the state of Louisiana was 14,083 in comparison with a free Black population of only 3,379, *Seventh Census*, 1850.
[66] Hirsch and Logsdon, *Creole* 193.

the "curious mix of persons and colors" they encountered.[67]

*Gens de couleur libres* were cosmopolitan in their connection to the broader world outside of Louisiana's borders, often traveling to and from the Caribbean ports of Santiago de Cuba, Port Au Prince, and Jamaica, as well as England and France. Hence, mayoral passport records further give us a glimpse into the variability that so greatly amused Latrobe. While these records relay a surprising lack of descriptive detail in terms of particular distinguishing attributes, they also reveal wide diversity within the community of color. Free travelers were alternately characterized with "*nez plat*" (flat nose), with "frizzled hair," as "negro," and of "red" "yellow" or "high yellow" complexion. Embarking for Port au Prince, Haiti in April of 1820 twenty-three year old St. Louis Dusseau measured a lofty 5' 8" tall, and was described as having a "high brown complexion." His wife, eighteen year old Marie Suzanne Blandin, stood a slight 5' in height and was of "high white" complexion.[68] This young couple certainly would have painted a disconcerting picture for some curious outsiders. Traveling to Pensacola in 1819, twenty-eight year old Joseph Malagara was described as a free negro with "three cuts on both sides of his mouth, being marks of his nation," markings attributed to the west coast of Africa. Malagara's visible African markings were also attributed to Adelaide, an enslaved woman traveling to Santiago. That these characteristics could not be automatically taken as signs of one's status is telling of the diversity within Louisiana's community of color.

Just as both enslaved and free persons could be characterized by their African markings, the features of many also betrayed their blended racial inheritance. Bondspersons were broadly described as mulatto, and some were further defined by "high light color" or a "high white

[67] Latrobe, *Sketches*, 162; Nichols, *Forty Years*, 188.
[68] Passports, 15.

complexion."[69] Mary Niall Mitchell has artfully considered how this racial ambiguity confounded Northerners to whom slavery, and in fact blackness, only had a black face. When abolitionists toured through the Northern states with young Louisiana slaves, who appeared white in every aspect, onlookers were scandalized not only by the slaves' whiteness, but by "the inability to see their blackness." Like white Northerners scrutinizing daguerreotypes searching for "the curve of the nose or the shape of the head that might indicate… African ancestry," cursory passport depictions evoke a sense of curiosity as one imagines what twenty-two year old Widow Baromée *fcl*, described as "rather white" with hair long and wavy, must have looked like.[70] Moreover, one has to wonder at the ease with which those issuing passports described traveling companions – "brown" husbands and "high yellow" wives, white men and mistresses ranging from "rather white" to "negresse" – flowing together to and from the port of New Orleans as a matter of course. As familial ties with whites was often a pathway to freedom, those of lighter aspect were reasonably assumed to be free and to enjoy higher status. Nonetheless, this standard did not serve as an absolute determinant of liberty or standing. A number of people of color with distinctive African physical attributes found their way into the free community just as many phenotypically white persons remained enslaved.

Such rare descriptions of free persons of color in Louisiana give us pause when faced with claims that elite free black communities seemed to desire, "to breed themselves closer to the white ideal," or that women of color "welcomed white males because they were flattered by the attentions they received from the 'superior' race."[71] In fact, Emily Clark has found that creole women of color not only consistently opted for unions within their own class, but neither skin color nor

[69] Passports, 16, 20, 27.
[70] Mary Niall Mitchell, "Rosebloom," 65; Passports.
[71] Ira Berlin, *Slaves*, 282; Blassingame, *Black New Orleans, 283.*

economic advantage appear to have been primary motivating factors. Young free women of color from prominent families at times even married men of conspicuous African ancestry, and of lesser economic means. Many cross-racial relationships in the free population were actually owing to a large gender disparity after the Saint-Dominguan Revolution; by 1830 there were 2.2 free women of color to every free man of color. The realm of options available to Saint-Dominguan women was ultimately delineated by the reality that in New Orleans they found themselves at a demographic disadvantage, without the support of their former social networks, and financially distressed. As for creole elites, Clark holds that, "marrying put the seal on a claim to traditional bourgeois morality that was important for those free colored aspiring to community leadership."[72] Likewise, tracing the tight-knit alliances formed within the remote Cane River community of color, Gary B. Mills found legal unions were regularly forged between men and women of color. Although the isolation of this small affluent society made the endogamy attributed to Louisiana's elite *gens de couleur* inevitable, Mills has qualified that hierarchy on Isle Breville was subtle, and "not based upon shades of skin as much as upon number of years which an individual was removed from slavery."[73] By law and by the mere existence of chattel slavery, race held considerable meaning in antebellum Louisiana society; however, this meaning was also mediated through the desires and actions of inhabitants. Evidence indicates that these historical actors did not always turn to whiteness as a rubric by which to determine their options. As Clark surmises, data "suggest that hierarchies of race and phenotype preoccupied Europeans more than they did the men and women upon whom they were inscribed."[74]

Disdain for the enslaved, isolation from free blacks, and a desire to lighten one's family

[72] Clark, *Strange History*, 83, 60.
[73] Mills, *Forgotten People*, 210.
[74] Clark, *Strange History*, 81-82.

line are all images that have effectively cast Louisiana's early community of color as, at once, homogenous and fractured. This reading imagines them within a rigid, racially-determined framework that overlooks the diversity within, and networks across, antebellum Louisiana society. For instance, Jerah Johnson has pointed out the way affluent *libres* appeared to isolate themselves from the rest of the community even as they negotiated various relationships around social and economic divides: "Acutely conscious of their legal rights and their group's interests as well as the tenuous and fragile nature of their position, they tended to act with an exceptionally high degree of cohesiveness. At the same time, individual members of the group freely associated with the European colonials, the African slaves, and the Indians, both free and slave."[75] Evidence appears to bear out Johnson's claim, suggesting that corporate-level affinity and cleavage within Louisiana's community of color primarily tracked along lines of socio-economic status and culture. *Gens de couleur libres* were organized primarily by class. Beyond the community of color class was joined by race and shared culture as organizing principles, particularly as more and more English-speaking Americans entered the state.

In keeping with the French corporatist model that prioritized binding together heterogeneous groups through cultivating a shared public culture, creole Louisianans maintained deep pride in their French-Catholic customs and language. This fellow feeling was a particularly important rallying point for the community of color as the inclusion of French-speaking Caribbean emigrants fortified *libres* against the influx of Anglo-Protestants who saw people of color as overstepping their place in society. Rodolph Desdunes held that Caribbean inhabitants and creole *libres* "lived on good terms, one group with the other, united under the same conditions: it was as though they had come from the same region and the same family… they formed one community,

[75] Johnson, "Colonial," 53.

alike in origin, language, and customs." Without the French-speaking emigrants' reinforcement, and without their essential influence in every domain, French culture in Louisiana would not have successfully maintained itself against American language, mores, and institutions for such a sustained period. These strong cultural bonds allowed French law and language to endure for several decades after the colony was remanded to the United States.[76]

Insofar as Louisiana's community of color was united by common language and customs it was also economically diverse. John Blassingame's catalogue of New Orleans households of color possessing $200 or more in property, taken from the 1850 Census, shows just how much wealth was acquired by this community, as well as just how much of that wealth was consolidated under a relatively small subsection of Louisiana's community of color. In this sample, just under 480 households representing about 2,100 inhabitants, or only 12% of the region's *gens de couleur libres*, collectively claimed nearly $2.3 million in property.[77] Indeed, the composition of these households provides an interesting snapshot of the larger community: 337 residents, or 16%, were noted as black and 27 of that number were said to have been born in Africa; 55 hailed from the Caribbean, and 36 whites were even counted among these households. Of the families cited, 430 claimed at least $1,000 in property, their collective wealth accounting for the lion's share of the whole at $2.16 million. This community's affluence was substantial, particularly considering that it did not account for the considerable resources of those living in Point Coupee, Natchitoches, and other plantation region parishes.

Nonetheless, a closer look at this data further complicates any easy explanation of the ways

[76] Desdunes, *Our People and Our History: Fifty Creole Portraits*, trans. and ed. Sister Dorthea Olga McCants (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 3; Dessens-Hind, "Les migrants," 44.
[77] Blassingame Census; Desdunes, *Our People*. It is possible that some may have underreported their holdings to census takers. For instance, Tomy Lafon, who was noted for his philanthropy, reported only $10,000 in property in 1850. Moreover, in 1846 the Soulié family paid state taxes on properties valued at $90,200, yet four years later Bernard Soulié reported a substantially lower figure of $50,000 to recorders, Soulié Family Ledgers.

that economic status operated in antebellum Louisiana's community of color; the numbers reveal that even seemingly well-situated *gens de couleur libres* were not necessarily alike in circumstance. It must be remembered that the significant majority of free persons of color in Louisiana lived well below the impressive means which have come to characterize this community. Additionally, many of the noted households supported a multiple inhabitants, diminishing families' relative resources. For instance, at the same time as forty-two year old marketman Ben Augustin was noted with $1,500 in property, his household supporting five other persons, thirty year old Madeline Augustine claimed $1,200 and lived alone. On the surface, Josephine and Lula Cavalier appear to have been more favorably situated, collectively possessing $11,000 in property – they also supported a household that included seven other persons, six of whom were as yet minors. While the concept of a middle class has no bearing in this context, there were certainly many people of color who were neither destitute, nor living extravagantly.[78]

Jean Boze's description of the lavish ballroom opened for people of color by Saint-Dominguan native M. Dupuis illuminates the differential status that separated the wealthiest *gens de couleur* and those of more modest means. Boze praised Dupuis' revitalization of the St. Phillipe theatre cornering Orleans and Bourbon streets for its elegance, beauty, and good taste. Admiring the ballroom for "its lavish furniture and decorations," Boze enthusiastically declared that it compared to the best in Paris. However, distinctions in the community of color become clear in his account of the circumstances that prevented his correspondent's natural daughters from attending a ball attended by more opulently dressed young ladies of color:

> Your kind Fortunée and Dorisca did not present themselves there as they could not,

[78] According to the 1850 Federal Census, Mulatto-headed households averaged 5.48 inhabitants, and households headed by blacks averaged just under 4 inhabitants. Table L. – Families and Dwellings of Free Colored, *Seventh Census*, 67.

> by their feeble means, appear in dresses as dazzling and distinguished as the other ladies. They content themselves with the society balls of their color in that same ballroom, but conducted by honest persons of their class… appropriate to the young ladies' kindness, friendliness, and sweetness of character.[79]

Here "class" takes on dual meaning, that of race and also of economic status. In this sense class indicates the lower socio-economic standing of these children of a wealthy yet absent white father, as much as it denotes their racial caste.[80] It was not race that inhibited the young ladies from attending the more luxurious ball, but their resources. Notably, balls attended by the ladies of color with the means for lavish costume are the same that many outsiders credited as quadroon balls, occurring two nights each week and barring free men of color. The same affairs at which enterprising mothers purportedly marketed their daughters to white men. However, that rich dress was a prerequisite for entrée into these circles speaks to the means already required to support such an endeavor. For those with the funds, perhaps alliance with white males circulating near the top of society served to enhance or preserve an already accustomed lifestyle more than it served as a reliable strategy for economic mobility. As for the propriety of the more extravagant ball, Boze only went so far as to relay mothers' complaints among themselves of the young men's taste and inconstancy in the company of their friends, which the elder gentleman seconded. The difference between these fêtes was largely characterized by the opulence of the former; Boze appears to have been pleased with the decorum of both celebrations.[81]

Class divisions within antebellum Louisiana's community of color are most readily

[79] Boze, 228.1, 157.4
[80] Henri de Ste-Gême lived in France and apparently only knew of his children's affairs through Boze's correspondence. In another letter Boze warned Ste-Gême that his natural son, Gême, had suddenly left for France, and, according to a friend, intended to see his father before returning to Louisiana, Boze, 1834, 238.9.
[81] "Mai helas! Nos dames du premier Rang se sont plaintes entr'elles et avec justice, de gout de Cavaliers et meme leur inconstance envers leurs semblables and d'un plus grand Merite. Elles ont eu raison," Boze, 1830, 157.4.

recognized in a binary of haves and have-nots, of the affluent quadroon and struggling black. Although a simple organizing principle, it yields an incomplete portrait of the community. Hirsch and Logsdon have pointed out that elitism manifested on the basis of class and profession, not color. For example, Desdunes explained that even among the upper echelons of this community certain class distinctions existed: "The upper class, composed of professional men, wishing to distinguish themselves, had formed the *Société d'Economie*, which confined its membership to those Creoles with tendencies toward exclusiveness. The artisans and craftsmen responded by forming the *Société des Artisans*." This distinction suggests that even more privileged *libres* could not be considered of one mind in terms of their relationship to the larger community of free and bound persons of color. For instance, the son of a well-positioned Frenchman, famous playwright Victor Séjour was afforded an education in Paris. Yet, as a founding member of the latter association, Séjour did not neglect to satirize the "bizarre conduct" of the more exclusive clique. Exclusivity on the basis of class or otherwise, by its very nature, was a value claimed by an elitist few.[82]

## A Learned Community

Focus on the highly visible movements of a narrow subsection of the most affluent *gens de couleur libres* has greatly oversimplified our view of this diverse and complex community, particularly where education is concerned. Lamenting what he saw to be the plight of the "unfortunate race" of quadroon women who presumably preyed upon wealthy white men. George William Featherstonhaugh estimated that, having great pain "lavished upon [their] education," such young ladies were "overeducated for the males of [their] own caste." However, in assuming

[82] Séjour's first poem, *Le Retour de Napoleon* (The Return of Napoleon), was said to be a satire against member of *Société d'Economie*, Desdunes, *Our People*, 29-30; Hirsch and Logsdon, *Creole*, 193.

that the training of these young women merely served as a means for the seduction of white men, the traveler missed what the Louisiana Supreme Court understood to be the actual state of things, that many *libres* were "enlightened by education."[83] For those at the top of this caste social and economic standing was attended by an expectation that affluent *libres* be learned and the means to make it so. One northern traveler's description of a New Orleans quadroon family of this class corroborated Rodolphe Desdunes' claim that *gens de couleur* of this era "loved such things as literature, painting, music, [and] the theater." Having frequently visited with this family over a course of time the traveler extolled the three "accomplished" young women of the household as "intelligent and well-informed." He further commended that, "their musical taste was especially well cultivated; they were well read in the literature of the day, and their conversation upon it was characterized by good sense and refined discrimination."[84] In such circles literary and artistic cultivation signified one's upbringing; as for learned whites, for *gens de couleur* education was not necessarily pursued as a means to financial gain. Literary and artistic accomplishments were neither a way to escape a debased condition nor considered frivolous endeavors; they were a realization of the refinement afforded those enjoying more privileged circumstances.

Contrary to Featherstonhaugh's assessment that affluent women of color were "overeducated" for their male counterparts, manumission and apprenticeship records reveal that the disparity between white male and female literacy characteristic of this period appears to have held true for free people of color as well. Men were regularly more likely to sign documents as opposed to a mark than women.[85] Moreover, New Orleans was actually home to a number of

[83] Featherstonhaugh, *Excursion*, 268.
[84]Desdunes, *Our People*, 13, 19; Olmstead, *Journeys*, 305.
[85] This trend was consistent with gender disparities in literacy found in the North. See Gloria L. Main, "An Inquiry into When and Why Women Learned to Write in Colonial New England," *Journal of Social History* 24 (1991); 579-589; Moss, *Schooling Citizens*, 84, 90-91.

accomplished *libres* men of noted literary talent. In 1845 Armand Lanusse *hcl* published *Les Cenelles,* an anthology of poetry that was the first such collection produced by people of color to be published in the United States. This volume highlighted the original works of a number of the region's accomplished *gens de couleur libres*. Lanusse himself was described by Desdunes as possessing a "studious temperament," and it was judged that his works gave "adequate proof of his broad education." Born in 1812, Lanusse was a not only a poet but a teacher, and he served fifteen years as the director of *L'Institute Catholique pour les Orphelins Indigents*, Louisiana's first school providing broadly for the instruction of less affluent *libres*. Desdunes held that Lanusse never attempted to hide or deny his ancestry in spite of his light skin color; "he was known to regard every man as an equal, and he practiced this doctrine as the director of the Orphan's Institute."[86] *Les Cenelles* included the works of a number of well-situated *gens de couleur,* many of whom had been educated in Paris, such as Camille Thierry, Pierre Dalcour, and playwright Victor Séjour.

For those fortunate enough to be in the uppermost tier of this class, education proved more than a means to an end; the cultivation of knowledge came to be a reward in its own right. The economic cachet of this set was a crucial variable that afforded them the freedom to satisfy their literary and artistic inclinations; financial comfort fostered the leisurely space in which to satisfy a taste for knowledge. Displaying both his delight in local politics and his acquaintance with classical literature, in 1842 Natchez merchant William T. Johnson relayed a colorful critique of political stump speeches he had attended. With apparent amusement Johnson noted of one hopeful that, "he made quite a lengthy spectacle… Richard the Third King Lear and several others of

[86] Desdunes, *Our People*, 13, 16.

ancient time was [sic] represented by him in part."[87] Mr. Johnson's familiarity with the works of Shakespeare was keen enough that, even now, his depiction evokes the melodramatic showmanship witnessed that day. As did wealthy *libres* like planter Baptiste Meullion, Johnson subscribed to local newspapers, and he endeavored so far as to create a "reading room" in his home. Far from an object of show, he took solace in his books, noting on a day he did not feel well that he, "repaired at an early Hour and remained Home all the evening sleeping and reading." This predilection for intellectual diversion was handed down from one generation to another. Johnson paid for his two girls to take music lessons, and in a letter from his son in New Orleans the youth solicited, "I wish you would tell sis to send me my book called Poetry and Prose of europe and america [sic] and lend me some of her Books to read."[88] Unlike the struggles faced by the majority of free blacks during this period, as well as long after the end of slavery, Louisiana's most well-situated *libres* possessed the means, occasion, and uninhibited space to enjoy knowledge beyond mere economic necessity. In 1853 Phoebe Smith wrote to Mrs. Johnson relaying that her daughter sent love to all of her playmates, "and also she is going to school and as soon as she can write she sais that she will wrighte to all the play mates."[89] Not only was this young girl learning to read and write, but her mother's easy manner implied that the playmates on the receiving end would have also been educated enough to read the letters sent them. Education for this well-situated community was not a vocation of mystery or preoccupation, but a mundane circumstance of living out their place in society.

[87] Diary of William T. Johnson, August 20, 1840, William T. Johnson and Family Memorial Papers, Mss. 529, 561, 597, 770, 926, 1093, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La. (hereafter cited as Johnson Papers).
[88] Diary entry, January 14, 1837; diary entry, June 7, 1840; notebook entry, music Lessons, August 30, 1855, September 30, 1855, October 29, 1855, November 30, 1855; letter from Richard M. Johnson to Ann Battles Johnson, July 23, 1859, Johnson Papers.
[89] Phoebe Smith letter, September 26, 1853, Johnson Papers.

As evidence suggests, cultivation and learning among Louisiana's community of color were not hidden for fear of white retribution. In fact, New Orleans was home to one of the Nation's earliest black owned newspapers, the *Daily Creole*, which commenced publication in 1856.[90] Unlike its postwar counterparts, the *Daily Creole* did not directly address questions of race and oppression, but instead this paper followed the vein of most periodicals at the time operating as a means of disseminating items of interest to the community; the paper editorialized on politics as well as local current events. In an 1854 issue the daily took up the subject of astronomy informing its readers that, with the help of a four-foot wide telescope, Sir William Herschel had found, "a star-group, consisting of 5000 individuals… he inferred that those specks were star-galaxies… so far off that light-beams only flash from them by passage of close upon a million years."[91] Evidently not only did the administrators of this publication deem such a discovery newsworthy, but their audience was apparently assumed knowledgeable enough to appreciate the finer details of contemporary astronomy.

Such scholarly engagement sits in striking contrast to one Northern traveler's experience of the region's white households. According to Olmstead, this man might "travel several days, and call upon a hundred planters, and hardly see in their houses more than a single newspaper a-piece, in most cases; perhaps none at all: nor any books except a Bible, and some government publications, that had been franked to them through the post office." Olmstead further described one household in which there lay a pile of books, seemingly "of the Tract Society sort" sent by the inhabitant's father in the North; many years of dust appeared to rest "undisturbed upon them." The traveler dismissed the man of the house as thoughtless and "content with an unoccupied mind."[92]

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[90] Library of Congress, Chronicling America: American Historic Newspapers, http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/.
[91] "The Galaxy of Stars," 9 July, 1856, *The Daily Creole*, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.
[92] Olmstead, *Cotton Kingdom*, 48, 15.

Due to the conventions of the time, the homes of Louisiana's free people of color remained a mystery to most white outsiders, leaving us scant evidence as to what they may have found there. Surviving accounts suggest, however, that for Johnson and his contemporaries literary and artistic pursuits were a matter of privilege and of personal preference, not mimicry.

While well-positioned *libres* enjoyed the means and leisure to pursue knowledge independent of pragmatic need, the value of a solid educational foundation permeated the community. Moreover, impressions have told of *libres* elites who deliberately isolated themselves from the darker and lesser-resourced community of color. Certainly such cleavages were present, but the actual state of things describes a more complicated portrayal of a phenotypically and financially diverse society, across which a number of supportive networks were forged. Although diverse in status and aspect, there was also a great deal of cohesion across Louisiana's community of color. The collective desire to properly train young *libres* played an important role in creating pathways that bridged the social and economic gaps between community members, and these bridges enabled movement across both social and economic divides.[93] For Louisiana's community of color, the value of education existed not merely in the schoolhouse, but in education itself. Formal instruction promoted community prosperity and stability in two important ways: first, training young community members prepared them to be productive adults, that is, able to contribute to the collective community wealth. At the same time, this community's ability to present itself as generally educated reinforced its social capital within the larger community.

[93] Nancy Beadie discusses schools as *bonding* and *bridging* institutions: "bonding relationships are those that intensify or strengthen social ties in a more or less closed community of insiders that might otherwise be defined by race, religion, class, culture, ethnicity, or geography. Bridging relationships are "thinner" than bonding relationships, but extend connections outside the community group." Race not being the sole identification for community members in this society, *libres* forged both bonds and bridges within the community of color as well as in networks that extended into the larger community. Education also, as Beadie proposes of the northern rural schoolhouse, served as a site of such relationships. Nancy Beadie, "Presidential Address: Education and the Creation of Capital: Or What I Have Learned from following the Money," *History of Education Quarterly* 48 (2008); 18.

Educated, productive *libres* played an integral role in New Orleans' collective social and cultural identity.

The preparation of Louisiana's young *libres* was a common aim around which those across the economic spectrum rallied, and this social capital was the framework upon which the community of color's education was built. As with their other prospects, material circumstance largely determined the ways in which *libres* were educated; however, whether one received formal instruction was not necessarily dictated by class. The various educational means pursued by this community highlights the networks *libres* forged across presumed cleavages. Affluent, educated, and skilled *libres* facilitated pathways to wider educational opportunity, which less favorably situated community members eagerly pursued.

**"in whatever positon fate has placed us": Formal Schooling Across Class**

*I can, with pleasure, deny sweet intoxication;*
*I can, without complaint, endure misfortune.*
*Little susceptible to the voice of a beautiful mistress*
*With perfect detachment I can guard my heart.*
*But there is a penchant which, despite myself, compels me;*
*To revitalize the blood that circulates in my veins,*
*I must write.*[1]

~ Armand Lanusse ~

Armand Lanusse's impulse to put pen to paper was clearly an expression of his creative inclination; however, his words are telling of a fundamental ambition that ran throughout Louisiana's community of color – literacy.[2] While Lanusse lyrically confessed that formal schooling did not lure his "soul to her torch," he approved of the learning he witnessed proliferating within the community:

> From all sides a great need for training is felt. We begin to understand that, in whatever position fate has placed us, a good education is a defense by which one can blunt himself against those character traits that invite slander and disdain. It is thus with feelings of pride that we see each day growing numbers of those among us who now, on firm footing, travel the difficult route of the sciences and the arts, each in the direction that draws him.[3]

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[1] Armand Lanusse, "Besoin D'Ecrire," in *Les Cenelles: Choix de Poesie Indegines* (New Orleans: H. Lauve et Compagnie, 1845; Reprint 1971), 191,

[2] When I use the word "literacy" I am referring to the state of being, liberally speaking, educated. On the one hand literacy is a literal measure of the ability to read and write, however, in regard to this case, literacy also signals a host of important considerations. Inherent in the ability to sign one's name, to create poetry, to teach, is the opportunity, time, effort, and opportunity cost of obtaining such skills. Literacy provides important testimony to *gens de couleur libres*' remarkable opportunity and achievement.

[3] Lanusse, *Les Cenelles,* 10.

On the most fundamental level the majority of the *libre* caste knew that, whether to protect their legal rights, to conduct business, or to be able to correspond with distant friends and family, they must read and they must write. And, in large part, they did. According to 1850 Federal census figures, of the 17,465 *gens de couleur libres* in the state, only 3,389 of those aged twenty or older were considered illiterate. While many subjective factors render census literacy data less than reliable, they do provide us with a comparative sketch.[4] On the whole, *libres* were noted to be literate at a higher rate than the average of all free people of color in of the slaveholding states. Louisiana's community of color was said to be literate at a rate of almost 81%, while the average literacy rate for the free black population across all of the slave states was cited at just over 74%.[5] Moreover, if we consider that the majority of the community's wealth belonged to less than 20% of its population, even given the inaccuracies in the reported data, it is clear that those who could not spare the means for extensive private schooling or tutors must have yet had opportunity and desire to pursue some form of "schooling." Evidence reveals that formal instruction was available beyond the uppermost tiers of this society, and young *libres* were able to obtain such training in a number of ways.

The broad educational attainment of Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* is notable in its own right, however, this case is exceptional when considered in regional context, and in

[4] In addition to concerns of bias, inattention to detail, and inconsistencies across census takers yields data that is incomplete beyond revealing particular trends. For instance, Louisiana whites were said to be literate at a rate of over 90%, despite the fact that the state had no free, public system of schooling until 1847, and only about half of all eligible, i.e. white, children were known to be in attendance in 1848. It is unlikely that, absent widespread access to formal schooling, the white population had attained near complete literacy by 1850. In addition, the data itself is misleading. In 1850, the number of illiterate individuals was taken only from those twenty or older, but the percentages were calculated against the entire population rather than those aged twenty or over, rendering much higher literacy rates over all sites surveyed. That is, an *illiteracy* number was taken only for the older age-group, and that number was measured against the entire population. Fay, *Education in Louisiana*, 69-70; CLIV – Age of Population for Purposes of Educational Comparison, 1850, 151; CLV – Foreign and Native Illiterate, 152; CXLIX – Persons in the United States over twenty years of age who cannot read and write, 145, *Seventh Census*.
[5] CLVII - Ratio of Illiterate Persons, Foreign, Native, and Free Colored, 1850, 153, *Seventh Census*.

comparison with other free communities of color. In order to understand the extent to which this community was able to create spaces for learning, the overall state of schooling during this period must be understood. Prior to the American Civil War education in the United States had yet to become synonymous with a uniform system of common schools, although, northern states were advancing well down that path by the second decade of the nineteenth century. In 1864 northern traveler Thomas Nichols reflected upon his earlier schooling experience:

> In my native state, and in all the States of New England, there was a schoolhouse every three miles, an academy in every considerable village, and colleges enough to supply the demand for a classical education… we could be doctors, lawyers, preachers, merchants; there were a hundred avenues to wealth and fame opening fair before us, if we only chose to learn our lessons.

Of course, such "common" schooling, which white pupils like Nichols took for granted, largely excluded northern people of color. Moreover, while northern cities were moving rapidly in the direction of universal public schooling, the South, and notably Louisiana, were slow to join the trend even for white students. According to Nichols, "we went, first of all, to common or free school. There were very few private or pay schools; and boarding-schools, except in the largest towns, were unknown."[6] In the South, schools overall remained few, and in Louisiana in particular, the trend was contrary to that described by Nichols. A significant number of students continued to patronize private and boarding schools up to the dawn of the Civil War.

Slavery reinforcing an exploitive hierarchy within the southern context, schooling in general was less readily available for those without the means to pay. There were proportionately fewer tax supported common schools, and private schools remained the preferred venue for those with sufficient means. This difference was a known and accepted fact of regional prerogative. In

[6] Nichols, *Forty Years*, 58, 62.

his 1850 *Compendium to the Seventh Census* J.D.B. DeBow cited that, "In many of the States, particularly in the South, there is no general public school system, some counties etc, supporting schools by taxes levied within their own limits, and in other cases the State contributing a proportion towards the support of private schools."[7] Indeed, the further one traveled south the fewer schools, of any sort, were apt to be found. Figure 1 shows that in 1840 New York claimed over 27,000 schools serving roughly 537,000 pupils, more than 60% of the state's children aged five to twenty. In Massachusetts over 3,500 schools reached 177,000 pupils, nearly 70% of the school aged white population, and by Virginia the number dropped to around 1,500 schools serving only 17% of white school-aged children. Further south, in South Carolina and Louisiana, the aggregate number of private and common schools was significantly lower at 683 and 231 respectively, and Louisiana's schools were serving little more than 5,500 students, just over 10% of the school-aged white population.[8] Certainly, the fear of insurrection foreclosed the opportunity for the education of slaves and many free blacks across the South, but evidence indicates that the plantation slave system worked to limit educational opportunity for a number of whites as well.[9]

Louisiana's community of color's apparent widespread ability to read and write leads us to question, then, not whether people of color were afforded formal instruction, but *where*? For families of color differential circumstances did not necessarily mean less care was taken in ensuring students gained basic reading, writing, and ciphering skills so much as it determined the

[7] *Seventh Census*, 141.
[8] Massachusetts, 11; New York, 23; South Carolina, 47; North Carolina, 43; Virginia, 39; Louisiana, 63; Mississippi, 59, *Sixth Census*, 1840.
[9] See Bruce W. Eelman, "'An Educated and Intelligent People Cannot Be Enslaved': The Struggle for Common Schools in Antebellum Spartanburg, South Carolina," *History of Education Quarterly* 44 (2004): 250-270; Sarah L. Hyde, *Schooling in the Antebellum South: The Rise of Public and Private Education in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2016); John Hardin Best, "Education in the Forming of the American South," *History of Education Quarterly* 36 (1996): 39-51; Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common School and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

| State | Academies and Grammar Schools | Pupils | % Pupils in Private | Primary and Common Schools | Pupils | Total Pupils | Total Schools | Total White Youths 5 to 20 | % White Youths 5 to 20 in School |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| NY | 505 | 34,715 | 6.46% | 10,593 | 502,367 | 537,082 | 27,075 | 854,869 | 63% |
| MA | 251 | 16,746 | 9.46% | 3,362 | 160,257 | 177,003 | 3,613 | 266,533 | 66% |
| VA | 382 | 11,083 | 23.88% | 1,561 | 35,331 | 46,414 | 1,943 | 267,305 | 17% |
| SC | 117 | 4,326 | 25.68% | 566 | 12,520 | 16,846 | 683 | 98,954 | 17% |
| MS | 71 | 2,553 | 23.66% | 382 | 8,236 | 10,789 | 453 | 67,462 | 16% |
| LA | 52 | 1,995 | 35.83% | 179 | 3,573 | 5,568 | 231 | 51,904 | 11% |

Figure 1

**1840 Regional Comparison of Schooling**

(Data taken from the *Sixth Census*)

form which such instruction might take. Educational opportunity for *libres* is best reckoned with along socioeconomic lines. This chapter explores the various venues in which *libres*, across class, were able to obtain formal instruction. The most affluent in the region enrolled their daughters in Catholic academies, hired tutors for their sons and daughters, and supported various private institutions. Many well-off families even sent their children north or to France to finish their education. Those who could not afford these means patronized a number of small, privately-run schools in and around New Orleans.

## Catholic Education

The Catholic Church played a fundamental role in establishing education for Louisiana's community of color, and ultimately parochial schooling came to serve as the preferred means of the instruction for the region's more privileged girls of color. Even before the North had abolished slavery, the Catholic Church had begun its work to educate Louisiana's young residents. For a

number of reasons, including the early colony's unforgiving environment, which placed the practical labor of its few young men ahead of formal schooling, early parochial education for boys was unsuccessful. However, the Church proved quite effective in establishing schools for the colony's young ladies, including pupils of color. These endeavors, begun over one hundred years before the American Civil War, matched the contributions of many northern religious orders in relative scope and influence. The Church's early inclusion of girls of color, a mission that Carter G. Woodson deemed "religion with letters," reflected the liberal social norms of the region during this period.[10] At the same time, this inclusion established the instruction of people of color as a regional norm. The relationship between the Catholic Church and what came to be predominately French Catholic *gens de couleur libres* helped in part to shape perceptions of the community as "enlightened by education."

In 1727, less than a decade after New Orleans was named the capital of the foundling colony, twelve Jesuit-sponsored Ursuline nuns arrived from France, establishing the first educational bonds with the region's nascent community of coslor. While called to New Orleans to take charge of the hospital, the Ursulines were foremost a teaching order, and the guiding rules of the order were careful to affirm this mission: "Hence, it is very important that the Ursulines should know and understand that they are called to instruct youth; that this is their vocation."[11] Within weeks of their settlement in New Orleans the nuns were teaching from their temporary home on the edge of the town. As their mission was to educate all in the "true Religion," the Ursuline school included instruction for girls of European descent, slaves, free girls and women of color, and

[10] Woodson, *Education*, 8. See also Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).
[11] Ursulines, *Rules and Constitutions for the Ursuline Religious of the Presentation of Our Blessed Lady: with instructions on the same / translated from the French edition of 1827* (New Orleans: T. Fitzwilliam, 1885), 185; Treaty of the Company of the Indies with the Ursulines in "The Ursulines of Louisiana," *LHQ* 2 (1919); 5-7.

indigenous women. By August of 1728, just a year after their arrival, the Ursuline school had forty-eight students; sixteen boarding, seven slave girls, who were also boarders, and twenty-five in the day school.[12] The nursing mission for which they were recruited to the colony would yet be delayed another six years.

In terms of their moral mission "the object constantly kept in view of the Ladies" was said to be the, "adorning of their pupils' minds with useful knowledge, and the forming of their hearts to virtue."[13] The girls attended classes six days a week; slave and Native students were instructed at a location outside of the school walls for two hours each day. Clark Robenstine has held that all girls were instructed in reading, writing, sewing, weaving, and the care of silkworms. With scant surviving record from this period, it is difficult to substantiate the claim; however, as Woodson has pointed out, in the Catholic mission the faithful's "first duty was to educate these crude elements" in order that they could "read the truth for themselves."[14] In keeping with such a charge, it is probable that these day scholars received some instruction in the rudiments of reading and writing, and likely that the boarding slave girls also quietly obtained such skills. Notably, Clark has highlighted that a 1797 debate raised by newly settled, and more racially conscious, Spanish nuns ended in the agreement that that mulatto (half black and half white) students would be accepted into the day school. According to Clark, the wording of the compromise indicates that the inclusion of mixed-race pupils had already been the practice. The sisters specified that, while the legitimate daughters of quadroon women and white men would continue to be accepted as boarders, mulatto students would be instructed separately from boarding students. As these

[12] Clark Robenstine, "French Colonial Policy and the Education of Women and Minorities: Louisiana in the Early Eighteenth Century," *History of Education Quarterly* 32 (1992), 199. This number is notable given that in 1726 Louisiana's total population of French citizens (including Germans and *engagées*) was tallied at under 2,000 persons. Allain, "In Search of a Policy," 98; Midlo Hall, *Africans*, 8.
[13] F. Lucas, *Metropolitan Catholic Almanac for the Year of our Lord 1836*, 154.
[14] Woodson, *Education of the Negro*, 8. See Also Cornelius, *When I Can Read*.

students were, due to the legal prohibition of interracial marriage, the issue of illicit unions, they would not have been accepted as boarders regardless of their race.[15] Hence, the highest levels of education were reserved for those with the greatest means and most prestigious pedigree, particularly after 1823 when the Convent moved two miles downriver from New Orleans, thereafter being accessible primarily to boarding students.

In 1821, nearly one hundred years after the arrival of the Ursulines, the Sisters of the Order of the Sacred Heart established the Academy of the Sacred Heart at Grand Coteau in St. Landry Parish, Louisiana. This academy served young women of color, Native American, and white pupils alike. Subsequent academies under the Order of the Sacred Heart were erected in Natchitoches and Baton Rouge in 1847 and 1851 respectively. According to Laura Ewan Blokker, the ability of slaves who had been in the service of the order to sign their names at the end of the Civil War indicates their inclusion on the sisters' educational mission as well. So consistently and quietly did the sisters of the Sacred Heart pursue their work that contemporary Aldric Lettin de la Peychardière counted the names of almost 2,600 graduates who had passed through her ranks within a fifty year span.[16] Unfortunately, due to devastating weather events and significant fires that have ravaged many of Louisiana's archives over time, evidence from this particular time period at the school is lacking.[17] We do, however, know that the curriculum included a noteworthy array of scholarly

[15] Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 134-135; Ursulines, *Rules*, 180. It should be noted, also, that this compromise indicates that some interracial unions were legally legitimized at this time. In fact, anecdotal evidence of such marriages appears in the record throughout the antebellum period.

[16] Laura Ewan Blokker, "Education in Louisiana," Prepared for: State of Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, Office of Cultural Development, and Division of Historic Preservation (Greensburg: Southeast Preservation, 2012), http://www.crt.state.la.us/Assets/OCD/hp/nationalregister/historic_contexts/Education_in_Louisiana.pdf, 37. Sister Bernard Mary Deggs, *No Cross, No Crown: Black Nuns in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans*, ed. Virginia Meacham Gould and Charles E. Nolan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 205. Edwin Whitfield Fay, *History of Education; Louisiana* (Washington: G.P.O., 1898), 131-132.

[17] As the academy's archivist regretfully relayed, "we know *that* we instructed them [girls of color], but beyond that we don't have any documentation," Sister Therese Gregoire, Mt. Carmel Motherhouse, New Orleans, LA, Phone conversation, December 29, 2015.

subjects over and above the staples of reading, writing (in both French and English), and arithmetic. The course of study encompassed elements of botany, chemistry, natural philosophy and geometry, ancient and modern history, mythology, domestic economy, plain and fancy needlework, as well as various other subjects.[18]

By 1843 there were said to be sixty boarding students both at the St. Michaels and Grand Coteau academies. The ladies at Grand Coteau Convent also gratuitously supported a small number of orphans; however, the cost of attendance indicates that the Sacred Heart academies largely catered to more affluent patrons. The 1839 *Metropolitan Catholic Almanac* indicated a significant fee of forty dollars per quarter, with music, drawing, and other fine arts incurring an additional charge. Nonetheless, there were a number of families of color capable of supporting such costs at that time.[19] Although data about who these particular students were has been lost, Peychardière gives us an evocative, if somewhat romantic, portrayal of the kinds of graduates who issued from Sacred Heart's tutelage:

> Wherever you see a housewife, simple, good, active, and pious, salute her; it was a flower who in days past lived at the parish of the Sacred Heart and there received the dew of heaven; wherever you will meet with a face chastely veiled, a young lady of modesty, an un-fussy manner, a guardian of the hearth, constant in the house of God, be you still inclined; that is a flower of the Sacred Heart.[20]

Given the current available evidence, we cannot know how accurately our informant's portrait

[18] F. Lucas, *Catholic Almanac, 1836*, 155.
[19] F. Lucas, *Catholic Almanac, 1839*, 166; F. Lucas, *Catholic Almanac, 1836*, 155; Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 57. Louisiana's community of color, who at the time possessed over $1.8 million worth of land and claimed 24 percent of the property owned by blacks in the entire South, has been deemed the wealthiest group of free blacks in the nation during the nineteenth century. See Loren Schweninger, "Socioeconomic Dynamics among the Gulf Creole Populations: The Antebellum and Civil War Years," in *Creoles of Color of the Gulf South*, ed. James H. Dormon (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 55. Various sources have placed the wealth of this community anywhere from Schweninger's figure to upwards of $22 million. See Robert C. Reinders, "The Free Negro in the New Orleans Economy, 1850-1860," *LHQ* 6 (1923); 273-285; Woodson, *Free Negro Owners*.
[20] Aldric Lettin de la Peychardière, *Une Paroisse Louisianaise*, quoted in Fay, *History of Education*, 132.

characterized Sacred Heart alums. However, contemporary and historian Charles Gayarré's estimation that *gens de couleur* were "most respectable," and that they "led lives quiet, dignified and worthy, in homes of ease and comfort" appears to corroborate a depiction of persons who were afforded an education that was as much about gentility as it was about academics. Boarders were treated to "uninterrupted attention," which was given to the cultivation of the "manners and principles of the young ladies, and to train them up to habits of order, neatness and industry." As this school operated exclusively as a *pensionnat*, taking only boarders, this same attention would have applied to young ladies of color from families with means to pay the high tuition.[21]

The first endeavor aimed exclusively at the education of girls of color began under the vision and direction of Marthe Fortière, often referred to as Sister St. Martha, in 1823.[22] Significantly, this effort persisted for over fifty years and enjoyed little opposition from the white community. Sister St. Martha lived and worked with the Ursulines, and although she did not become a part of the community, she did associate herself with one of their apostolates, taking on the instruction of enslaved women and free girls of color. When, in 1824, the Ursulines moved their convent and school to a location just downriver from New Orleans, Fortière remained on with the school. In turn, when St. Martha returned to Paris in 1831 to recruit additional aid, the Ursulines agreed to take again control of operations. However, when Fortière returned from France in 1832 with two women who, for unknown reasons, did not appear up to the charge, the future of the school seems to have come into question. Favorably disposed toward the institution's mission, the

[21] F. Lucas, *Catholic Almanac, 1841*, 162.
[22] Charles E. Nolan, *Bayou Carmel: The Sisters of Mount Carmel of Louisiana (1833-1903)* (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1977), 17. Variously referred to as Martha or Marthe Fortier, Fortière , and Fontiere. Emily Clark and Virginia Gould, "The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans, 1727-1852," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 59 (2002), 441; Virginia Meacham Gould, "Henriette Delille, Free Women of Color, and Catholicism in Antebellum New Orleans, 1727–1852," in eds. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, *Free Women of Color in the Americas* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 279.

Bishop's council expressed the desire that the school be continued, and Bishop de Neckere promptly entreated the Ursulines to continue to manage the school. Fortière agreed to such an arrangement on the condition that the work with free girls of color continue on the premises.[23] As with the Academy of the Sacred Heart, information on the curriculum and student body during this early period is lacking. However, the period of Ursuline control can give us a glimpse of the school's curriculum as it likely followed that of the Young Ladies' Academy located two miles below New Orleans; the same school that the Ursulines had been conducting for over a century by this time. As with the Ursuline Academy, subjects probably would have included instruction in the English and French languages, writing, arithmetic, geography, history (ancient and modern), English and French Literature, and needlework.[24] While the specific curriculum is uncertain, the school clearly followed a French system for evaluating students. Surviving records show a grading scale from E.B (*extra bien*) to P (*pauvre*). Apparently attentive to student decorum, the sisters further saw fit to include less conventional measures for young ladies to whom the standard scale did not apply: *paresseuse* (lazy), *entêtée* (stubborn), and *dissipée* (flighty).[25]

Notably, it was with this period under the management of the Ursulines that the school came to be decisively established in the community. In 1834 Ursuline sister St. Francis de Sales Aliquot was sent to work at the school; she was accompanied by her two blood sisters, one of whom has been credited with acting as the "guiding force" for the school.[26] As the story has been variously retold, during an earlier visit from France, Jeanne Marie Aliquot's life had been saved by a man of color, and it is said that from that time she committed her life to the education and benevolent aid of New Orleans' community of color. Aliquot's passion, affluence, and

[23] Clark and Gould, "Feminine Face," 441; Gould, "Henriette Delille," 279; Nolan, *Bayou Carmel*, 18.
[24] F. Lucas, *Catholic Almanac, 1836*, 155; Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 57.
[25] "Primes de Conduite, 1er Octobre, 1870," Archives of the Sisters of Mount Carmel, New Orleans, LA.
[26] Nolan, *Bayou Carmel*, 19.

circumstance worked to the school's favor. Due to low enrollments, the College of Orleans was dissolved in 1826, and the land and buildings subsequently passed hands several times until 1834 when Jeanne Marie Aliquot purchased the St. Claude Street property for $9,000.[27] Continuing on in her work with the sisters for the next several years, Aliquot eventually sold the site to the Ursulines for $5,000, "together with the high house and all other edifices and all dependencies." Indeed, the terms of this sale are telling of the earnestness with which the initial endeavor continued to be carried out. The transfer specified: "The establishment as it is now set up for the education of free children of color of the feminine sex will be preserved and continued in perpetuity in this location by said Ursuline Nuns and they can never either sell or otherwise alienate the said location." Within a few months the Ursulines added the property adjacent to the school at the cost of $10,000.[28]

Finally, in 1838 the School came under the care of Carmelite sisters Thérèse and Augustine, as had originally been planned in 1832, when the two nuns had been recruited from France to take on the mission.[29] Their order greatly taxed by oversight of the St. Claude Street School in addition to their own, the Ursulines were actively seeking new custodians, and the Ladies of Mount Carmel were eager to take on the charge which they had already waited several years to assume. The property was ceded to the Sisters of Mount Carmel on April 16th, 1838 with only a few, but explicit, conditions – the foremost obligation being that the "establishment be continued

[27] Sr. Mary Francis LeBlanc, O. Carm., "Fire and Water," (unpublished manuscript, Mt. Carmel Motherhouse, New Orleans, LA, 1972); Nolan, *Bayou Carmel*; Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*; Carmelite Nuns (CN), *The Divers Documents – Years 1834, 1838 & 1840*. $3,000 of the cost of the property was mortgaged to affluent free man of color Norbert Soulié.

[28] Despite appearances, Aliquot did not sell the property at a loss. The agreement included provision that Aliquot would be paid $2,000 at such time as she left the school. That together with the $3,000 mortgage still owed on the property brought the cost, with all obligations paid, to $10,000. CN, *Divers*.

[29] The two sisters were at first re-directed to work at a school in Plattenville. The record is not explicit as to what initially kept the Bishop from placing the care of the school under these sisters as they had planned for. It appears that the involvement of both Marthe Fortier and Jeanne Marie Aliquot, neither of whom formally belonged to the Ursuline or any other Catholic order, had something to do with delay. Nolan, *Bayou Carmel*.

for colored girls." In fact, a second Act of Cession was drawn up on November 25th of 1840; like the first, it reiterated that the use of the property was intended for "the education of colored children of free birth." Further, a provision was added requiring that, of the children of color admitted, "at least FIVE (5) must be admitted free of charge," and "must be fed and clothed at the expense of the establishment."[30] Almost two decades after its founding, and true to the school's originating mission, the Congregation of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was cited as operating a day and boarding school for free children of color. It continued that the ladies would "devote themselves exclusively to the education of such persons until the number of sisters be increased."[31] Interestingly, in a visit to the current school, the archivist shared that, at the time, the white community had complained volubly about the school, not because it was educating children of color, but due to the fact that *gens de couleur* were able to educate their daughters so favorably where little such opportunity existed for young white girls within the city limits. Indeed, by 1840 the eight sisters in residence served 25 boarders and 65 externs. A second school for white students was opened in the fall of 1840, and by 1843 the separate schools were said to be serving between 70 and 80 pupils each.[32] In 1845 it was favorably maintained that the sisters "have an excellent school under their care, divided into two departments - one which is appropriated to white and the other to free colored children." It was also stated that "many of the latter class have wealthy parents, and pay a high price for their education."[33]

Around the time that the Carmelites were taking over the St. Claude Street School, Henriette Delille, Juilette Gaudin, and Josephine Charles, all free women of color, were beginning

[30] CN, *Divers*.
[31] F. Lucas, *Catholic* Almanac, 1840, 124.
[32] F. Lucas, *Catholic* Almanac, 1843, 125; Nolan, *Bayou*, 22; Sister Therese Gregoire, personal conversation, January 6, 2015.
[33] Quoted in Nolan, *Bayou Carmel*, 24.

to "redefine themselves as pious women." Moving into a house near the Carmelite School in 1842 the three women took on the work of ministering to impoverished and ailing persons of color. They eventually came to educate children of color, although the exact date that their school, St. Mary's Academy, became a separate entity from the St. Claude Street School is inconclusive. Indeed, faced with declining enrollments toward the close of the nineteenth century, the Carmelite School for girls of color closed, sending their few remaining students to the Sisters of the Holy Family's St. Mary's Academy for Young Ladies of Color.

The early and sustained education of Louisiana's young ladies of color was instrumental in the subsequent education for all *gens de couleur libres*. The moral mandate that assumed the inclusion of enslaved and free girls of color ultimately established the education for persons of color as a non-threatening and normalized aspect of Louisiana society. Early Catholic education in Louisiana began as an evangelizing mission, one that fell largely to devout women whose enterprise it was to nurture young ladies so that they might "people the cities and spread the good seeds of piety that has been sown in their hearts."[34] However, in adorning their pupils' minds with knowledge of the scripture and the sacraments, the Church spread not only the seeds of piety, but of literacy. The Church's mission to convert women and girls of color through "religion with letters" created a space in which not only devotion to the Catholic faith, but literacy was nurtured and grew.

**Schooling at the Top**

Parochial schools for the more affluent girls of this class notwithstanding, the state's free community exemplified Leonard Curry and Ira Berlin's assertion that schooling for people of color

[34] Ursulines, *Rules*, 182.

in the South tended to be independent of churches and either entrepreneurial or sponsored by wealthy free persons.[35] Indeed, the level of financial independence enjoyed by a noteworthy portion of the community afforded many families of color the opportunity to educate their children without charitable support. In 1835, wealthy planter and free man of color Andrew Durnford wrote to his friend and business associate John McDonogh. In the postscript he relayed that while he was away in town his ten year old son Thomas had sustained a severe sickle cut on his arm. The incident apparently convinced Durnford that the time had come to direct his son toward more productive, and safer occupation. He shared, "after the rolling season I will take him to town to put him to school." Four years later, presumably after having acquired some foundational instruction, young Thomas was sent to Lafayette College in New York to complete his education. The elder Durnford's first letter to Thomas closed with parental feeling: "your mother embraces you with all her heart, as does grandmother, and as for me, I love you as I do my own eyes." He then appended that another young man, possibly a friend of Thomas', was enrolled in a good boarding school and doing well.[36] What is notable about the references made to schooling itself is that the topic was treated as an afterthought, relegated to the level of interesting but unexceptional post-script. The fact that both of these boys would attend private school in New Orleans, and that Thomas would pursue advanced schooling, were matters of course. Overall, Andrew Durnford's letters to his son conveyed the tone one would expect from any father parenting from afar; he admonished Thomas to be respectful, work hard, and dress warmly. Although such correspondence gives us only a small glimpse into the place schooling held for Louisiana's affluent *gens de couleur*, it is reasonable to

[35] Curry, *Free Black*, 160; Berlin, *Slaves*, 305.
[36] Andrew Durnford letter to John McDonogh, November 10, 1835, St. Rosalie Plantation Record, Manuscripts Collection B-90, Louisiana Research Collection, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA; David O. Whitten, *Andrew Durnford: A Black Sugar Planter in the Antebellum South* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 102; translation quoted in Whitten, 107.

conclude that formal instruction, as part of preparing the next generation, was commonplace for this class.

As with young Thomas Durnford's early schooling, this aspect of young *libres*' lives was most often mentioned in passing or not at all, leaving little more than tuition receipts and personal correspondence as evidence of where young *gens de couleur* obtained the skills necessary to thereby conduct their own business. In 1833 the son of prominent Natchez barber William T. Johnson, William Jr., was returned home from an unnamed boarding school with a note from his teacher that lamented the unfortunate circumstances that had called him home early, and praised his progress "in grammar and geography, both of which were new to him."[37] Having nine surviving children, attending to the education of the Johnson brood appears to have been as routine as buying household provisions. In 1853, receipts indicate that the two eldest, Byron and William, were attending school at a monthly tuition of $2.00 each, and in 1855 they were placed under the tutelage of a close family friend at a total rate of $3.50 monthly. William junior subsequently attended boarding school in New Orleans, and by 1855 the young Johnson girls were also receiving music lessons at the cost of $5.00 every month. Despite being the children of a former slave, William Sr. himself freed with his mother at the age of five, the utility of formal education was not lost on this liberated generation. In 1844 the senior William's sister, Adelia Miller, wrote from New Orleans that she was contemplating sending her two boys to school in Kingston in the hopes that Mr. Johnson would accompany Mr. Miller on the journey.[38]

Historians such as Ira Berlin and Henry Bullock have asserted that, for the free class, access

[37] William T. Johnson and Family Memorial Papers, Mss. 529, 561, 597, 770, 926, 1093, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, 1833 Letter.
[38] Notebook entry, "paid Ms. McCary for Byron and Williams Schooling," August 22, 1855, September 22, 1855; receipt, "Tuition for Children at two per month," Natchez April 3, 1853; Adelia Miller February 16, 1844 Letter to William T. Johnson, Johnson Papers.

to schooling relied on connections with well-resourced whites. Certainly Andrew Durnford's relationship with John McDonogh, a wealthy white planter, served to smooth the path for young Thomas; however, by the 1820s, Louisiana's community of color need not rely on such connections. The sponsorship of whites, or lack thereof, did not automatically determine *libres*' educational opportunities, particularly within the intimate space of rural communities. Prior to the war the plantation regions of the state were home to many families of color who had amassed considerable wealth, and who largely created their own educational opportunities by attracting young educated men to serve as teachers. These families payed for the local school's operation through donations and tuition. Gary B. Mills' extensive study of Cane River's community of color, who accumulated substantial property 200 miles to the northwest of New Orleans, treats us with significant details about the education afforded pupils of color in this isolated community. Mills' account traces formal instruction back to 1828, under French-born Nicholas Charles LeRoy. The curriculum was conducted primarily in French into the nineteenth century, and included texts such as *Memoires d'un Medecin la Comtesse de Charny*, *Histoire Romain depuis la Fondation de Rome*, and the *Civil Code of the State of Louisiana.* By the dawn of the Civil War, the community of Isle Brevelle also boasted its own Catholic school for girls. St. Joseph Convent under the Daughters of the Cross opened its doors in 1858 and was attending to upwards of 120 young ladies of color by 1859.[39]

In Pointe Coupee parish prior to the Civil War *libres* supported their own schools by obtaining rooms in principle houses, hiring teachers of color, and assessing a per-pupil tuition fee. The result of this education was that, out of nearly two hundred "colored" families in Pointe Coupee who were free before the war, Nathan Willey held that only one was known to be illiterate

[39] Mills, *Forgotten People*, 184, 185, 187.

at the war's end.[40] The Grimble Bell School for Free Negroes, an elite private institution in Washington, Louisiana, also catered to the educational needs of the youth of wealthy planters. Families paying a substantial monthly tuition of fifteen dollars, four teachers were responsible for the instruction of approximately 125 students.[41] The Grimble Bell School taught all of the customary subjects, including writing, arithmetic, history, bookkeeping, French, English, and Latin. The school ultimately closed in the 1850's as a result of mounting racial tensions in St. Landry Parish preceding the war. However, New Orleans contemporary Nathan Willey held that, "since it has been closed many of the youth have been sent to private schools in New Orleans." Apparently, for affluent *libres*, the closing of one school did not preclude opportunities for continued studies at another.

After receiving a foundational education in private schools around the state, affluent young *gens de couleur* who desired to continue on in their schooling were faced with the question of where to best pursue that aim. It is well known that Louisiana's *libre* elites regularly chose to acquire advanced education in France. In a visit to a lecture at the Sorbonne in Paris, Charles Sumner noted with curiosity young men of color "dressed quite *à la mode*, and having the jaunty air of young men of fashion…. They were standing in the midst of a knot of young men, and their color seemed to be no objection to them." Sumner acknowledged that, "with American impressions, it seemed very strange."[42] It would be little surprising if these particular young men were Louisiana's *gens de couleur* studying abroad, pupils at least nominally American themselves. Study abroad was largely a cultural choice for French-speaking families of color. Nonetheless, regardless of whether students of color wished to remain closer to home for the next phase of their

[40] Willey, "Education," 248.
[41] Sterkx, *Free Negro*, 269.
[42] David McCullough, *The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 131.

education, there was little such opportunity for advanced schooling for people of color within the region. Although Louisiana claimed twelve institutions that fell under the category of university or college by 1840, none of those establishments openly accepted persons of color. Moreover, in the French nomenclature, and at that time, the term "college" often indicated the kind of institution that later came to be categorized, at best, as a high school, not an establishment of post-secondary schooling. According to Fay's early report on education in the state, only the College of Louisiana and the College of Jefferson held to the standards expected of a mature degree-granting institution. He held that, beyond these two schools, "there were a few institutions that seem to have been just on the border line between the colleges proper and the academies." Moreover, Anglo-Protestant culture and English language dominance rendered northern alternatives less desirable to most Francophone Catholics, students of color and whites alike. Hence, while Thomas Durnford and the sons of Barthelemy and Cécé *fcl* MaCarty did make use of limited opportunity for higher education in the North, many more creole *gens de couleur* found it necessary to cross the Atlantic in order to attend schools in the French cities of Paris, Bordeaux, and Montpellier.[43]

Cultural affinity notwithstanding, many *gens de couleur* found that France provided the only educational space in which they could acquire the focused training in their chosen professions. Mathematician and educator EJ Edmunds studied in Paris as did fencing master, mathematician, and skilled craftsman Basile Crokère. Crokère used his technical training to earn a reputation as one of New Orleans' most skilled staircase architects.[44] In the mid-nineteenth century, Louisiana

[43] For discussion on northern antebellum colleges that served free people of color, see John Bell's study of northern abolitionist colleges, John Frederick Bell, "Equality by Degrees: Abolitionist Colleges and the Throes of Integration, 1833-1895," (unpublished dissertation, Harvard University, 2017). Department of State. *Compendium of the Enumeration of the Inhabitants and Statistics of the United States, as Obtained at the Department of State from the Returns of the Sixth Census.* Washington: Thomas Allen, 1841, 63; Fay, *Education in Louisiana*, 45-54; Andrew Zakrzewski, "Michel Séligny, Homme de Couleur: Une Facette de la Littérature Louisianaise," Thèse, l'Université Laval, 1999, 54.
[44] Desdunes, *Our People*, 77.

also boasted six physicians of color: Alexandre Chaumette, Oscar Guimbillotte, and Louis C. Roudanez all received medical degrees in Paris and returned to the city of New Orleans to practice their craft. As New Orleans' first practicing physician of color Alexandre Chaumette faced white opposition early in his tenure; however, his skill and experience gained as a hospital intern in Paris won over both people of color and whites. Guimbillotte practiced medicine in the state for over twenty-five years, and Desdunes held that, although being white in appearance, married a woman of color and "lived without ever being embarrassed over his origin."[45] Louis Roudanez began his professional training studying business in New Orleans. Upon accruing the funds to take up his medical studies abroad, he traveled to Paris where he received his medical degree at the French Medical Academy in 1853.[46]

The most famous of antebellum Louisiana's professionals of color, however, was engineer Norbert Rillieux. Rillieux studied at *l'Ecole Centrale* in Paris, where he has been esteemed as one of the institutions celebrated alums, or *Centraux Célèbres*. By the age of twenty-four Rillieux had

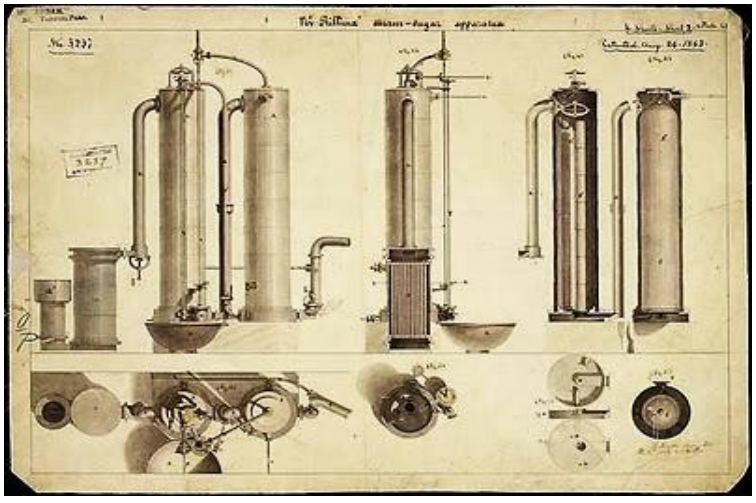

Figure 2

**Norbert Rillieux's Plan for Sugar Refining**

(Courtesy Oxford African American Studies Center)

[45] Desdunes, *Our People*, 75-76; Laura V. Rouzan, "Dr. Louis Charles Roudanez: Publisher of America's First Black Daily Newspaper," *Southern Atlantic Review* 73 (2008): 54-58; Thomas J. Ward, *Black Physicians in the Jim Crow South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003).
[46] Rouzan, "Roudanez," 54.

served as an instructor in applied mechanics at *l'École*, and had written several papers on steam engine work. Putting his expertise to practical use, while studying in Paris in 1846, Rillieux developed the vacuum pan method of sugar refining, an innovation that revolutionized the industry (figure 2).[47] Back in the United States, Rillieux spent a number of years perfecting his method, efforts which made the Rillieux system synonymous with sugar refining for nearly a decade. As a testament to the value of his innovation, in 1850 the *New Orleans Daily Crescent* relayed that a great fire had destroyed a sugar-house in West Feliciana. Total losses were estimated between $80,000 and $100,000, and the paper editorialized that, "the Rillieux apparatus was used for making sugar by Mr. Barrow, which renders the loss so great."[48]

During this time Rillieux also maintained his connection to the community of color. While conducting experiments, he made certain to fulfill his promise to visit Andrew Durnford's son. Durnford shared: "Rillieux is at Packwood with his machinery to make white sugar… he saw Thomas on the 7th of November, he had promised me to go and see him before he left Philadelphia… he told Thomas what he says of one of his brothers now in france, that he must do without money, as it will not be a good companion to good studies."[49] Certainly the elder Durnford appreciated his friend's additional kindness in working to soothe Thomas' feeling of neglect with the assurance that his own kin endured the same trials much further from home. In the end, as was the case with a number of this class, the racial opposition Rillieux faced compelled him to return to France around the time of the Civil War. By his departure the exclusive rights to manufacture

[47] P. Horsin-Deon, *The Louisiana Planter and Sugar Manufacturer.* XIII, Nov. 24, 1894, quoted in "Additional Biographical Material about Norbert Rillieux: Sugar Chemist and Inventor." The Faces of Science: African Americans in the Sciences (2007), https://webfiles.uci.edu/mcbrown/display/rillieux_biography.html. Famous l'Ecole Centrale alums; F4Dossiers "centraux célèbres," Fonds d'archives modernes de l'Ecole Centrale de Paris.
[48] *The Daily Crescent*, January 17, 1850, Morning, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Library of Congress.
[49] Andrew Durnford letter to John McDonogh, December 24, 1843, John McDonogh Papers, Louisiana State Museum Historical Center, New Orleans, La.

and sell Rillieux's sugar-boiling apparatus had long been in the hands of Merrick and Sons of Philadelphia.[50]

Louisiana's creative community identified closely with French literature, art, and culture, and many privileged young men of this set likewise honed their talents in France. Noted sculptor Eugene Warbourg was born a slave in 1825, and began his training in New Orleans under French sculptor Phillipe Gabriel. In 1852 A. Sampson wrote the young artist a letter of introduction to Monsieur Lafaure in Paris. In the communication Sampson described Warbourg's desire to further develop his craft and characterized the artist as a man of irreproachable conduct.[51]As with Warbourg and many others, renowned author Michel Séligny received a sound scholarly foundation in New Orleans. In his home state Séligny learned French, Latin, English, and Spanish from French Saint-Dominguan refugee Francois D'Hébécourt. However, around 1824, after completing his primary education, Séligny traveled to France, at the presumed expense of his white father, to pursue an advanced curriculum at Collège Saint-Barbe in Paris. Saint-Barbe's course of study included poetry, literature, geography, history, mathematics, and the natural sciences.[52] Having refined his literary talent abroad, Séligny has been regarded as Louisiana's "most prolific short-story writer," and the editors of the *New Orleans Bee* and the *Courier of Louisiana* esteemed him "one of the most distinguished Louisiana writers."[53] Such praise was certainly not granted lightly as Louisiana was home to a number of learned men who cultivated their taste for French romanticism on the continent, returning to Louisiana to share their own original work.

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[50] *Houma Ceres*, May 23, 1857, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Library of Congress. http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/.
[51] A. Sampson letter introducing Eugène Warburg, November 23, 1852, HNOC.
[52] Frans C. Amelinckx, "Social Christianity in Short Stories and Novellas of Michel Séligny," *LHQ* 39 (1998); Jules Etienne Joseph Quicherat, *Histoire de Saint-Barbe: Collège, Communauté, Institution* Vol.III (Paris: Hachette et Co., 1864), 25.
[53] Amelinckx, "Social Christianity," 65. Amelinckx cites several examples from *L'Abeille* and *Le Courrier de la Louisiane* in the footnote.

Similarly, *Les Cenelles* originator Armand Lanusse was known to have attended school at *l'École Polytechnique* in Paris, and several other contributors such as Desormes Dauphin and Pierre Dalcour have also been noted to have completed their schooling abroad. Notably, when in Paris Dalcour frequented the same literary circles as Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo alongside friend and playwright Victor Séjour and Séligny's half-brother Camille Thierry. His prospects repressed by Louisiana's racial climate, Séjour eventually moved permanently to Paris where he could freely practice his craft. According to an 1859 French newspaper, the Emperor and Empress attended the premier of his production, *Fortune Teller*, and, "expressing the nation's sentiments, the Emperor combined his cheers with those of all in attendance."[54] Like Séjour, violinist Edmond Dédé honed his craft abroad, studying at the Paris Conservatory of music. Able to cultivate and showcase his talents, Dédé served as the conductor at the Theatre of Bordeaux for twenty-five years. In addition Michel Séligny's father in-law Mirtil-Ferdinand Liotau finished his education in France as did Joseph Rousseau, the son of Jean Rousseau – one of the community's wealthiest men of color.[55]

**From learning to Teaching**

As Frans Amenlinckx has pointed out, Louisiana's elite literary community of color was comprised of artisans, and "particularly of teachers."[56] One creole woman of color, Louisa Lamotte, was recognized for her influential and sustained work as an educator in France. Having attended school in Paris, and after having passed her exams, Lamotte was taken on as a professor

[54] Also recorded as Liotaud. *Le Courrier de Bretagne*, "Faits Divers," 31 Décembre, 1859. http://recherche.archives.morbihan.fr/ark:/15049/vta52562521a2fee/daogrp/0#id:886874812?center=2265.3586338056607,-2273.7529343624146&zoom=4

[55] Edward Larocque Tinker, *Les Ecrits de Langue Français en Louisiane au XIX Siècle* (Paris:, 1932), 272, 83. Desdunes, *Our People*; Lanusse, *Les Cenelles*.

[56] Michel Séligny and Frans C. Amelinckx, *Homme Libre de Couleur de la Nouvelle-Orléans: Nouvelles et Récits* (Sainte-Foy, Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1998), 14.

in that city. She taught for forty years and rose to the positon of director of the *Collège de Jeunes Filles d'Abbeville,* and published *Recueil de questions orales posées aux examens du brevet de capacité pendant les années 1879 et 1880* in 1881. According to Tinker, Lamotte received the *Palmes Académiques* from the French government, the country's oldest non-military honor established to recognize those who have rendered eminent service to French education.[57] Outside of the Catholic Church, women in Louisiana enjoyed little opportunity to rise to prominence within any occupation, and as a woman of color Lamotte certainly would not have been afforded such opportunity in the state. Abroad, however, she was not only able to realize her full potential as a student, but as an educator.

Many literary *gens de couleur* did find immediate practical application for their liberal training back in Louisiana as they took on important roles as educators. Learned young men of color used their scholarly training to shift, however temporarily, from the role of student to that of teacher. Both in the North and the South, prior to the American Civil War teaching was less considered a profession than it was seen as means of employment for those yet to be settled in a more permanent circumstance; very few took teaching on as a long-term career.[58] As Thomas Nichols described of his own experience, "we had no professional teachers in those days for our common schools. Some bright, well-taught girl who loved books better than spinning, taught our

[57] Tinker, *Les Ecrits*, 271; L. Rouilliot Lamotte, *Recueil de questions orales posées aux examens du brevet de capacité pendant les années 1879 et 1880* (Paris: C. Delagrave, 1881). Lamotte also authored L. Rouilliot Lamotte, *Discours de Mme L. R.-Lamotte, directrice du collège des jeunes filles d'Abbeville, prononcé à la distribution solennelle des prix, le 28 juillet 1884* (Paris: F. Pichon, 1884), and L. Rouilliot Lamotte, *De l'Enseignement secondaire des filles, par Mme L. R.-Lamotte* (Paris : C. Delagrave, 1881); "The American Society of the French Academic Palms," http://www.frenchacademicpalms.org/information.html

[58] Dana Goldstein, *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession* (New York: Doubleday, 2014); Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Kimberley Tolley, *Heading South to Teach: The World of Susan Nye Hutchison*, 1815-1845 (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Hyde, *Schooling in the Antebellum South*.

summer school. In winter we generally had a student from the nearest college."[59] Louisiana's rural communities of color appear to have relied heavily on such teachers. Bellazaire Meullion, the daughter of wealthy planter Jean Baptiste Meullion that subsequently came to oversee her own plantation, may have been one who took greater satisfaction in books than in spinning. In 1850 mademoiselle Meullion received the sum of ten piasters in payment for one year of instruction given to Madeleine Lemond.[60] From the 1830s up to the Civil War students in the remote Cane River community were alternately taught by free men of color Desormes Dauphin and Oscar Dubreil, both of whom had studied in France, as well as Emile Chevalier and Oscar Dupre. Schools within the city of New Orleans also made use of *libres*' temporary employment as educators. Lewis Durand was briefly recognized as a schoolmaster as early as 1811, and Edmond Dupuy was recorded as a teacher in 1832. Notably, by 1850 Dupuy had transformed himself from educator to wealthy capitalist, documented as possessing about $25,000 in property.[61] Given the continuing ease with which wealthier *gens de couleur* were able to obtain schooling for their children it is likely that many more educated persons of this class quietly lent their services, instructing the next generation.

The temporary nature of the profession notwithstanding, there do appear to have been some persons of color who, like Lamotte, pursued teaching as a serious vocation. Having returned from his studies abroad in 1829, Michel Séligny founded the exclusive Académie Sainte-Barbe at the corner of Saint-Phillip and Dauphin Streets in 1833. Séligny's academy, held to have been "one

[59] Nichols, *Forty Years*, 59.
[60] Bellazaire Meullion receipt from Baptiste Mortola, 1850 May 3, Meullion Family Papers, Mss. 243, 294, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.
[61] Mills, *Forgotten People*, 184, 185, 187; 1811 NOLA City Dir. Note: only one Louis/Lewis Durand listed in NOLA 1811. Louis Durand *hcl* apprenticed son in 1821, and a 1783 letter exists from an L. Durand to his sister in Cap-Francais (she was designated as a mulatto), L. Durand Letter, MSS 29, HNOC. In 1850 Edmond Dupuy was cited as having $25,000 in property, Blassingame Census.

among many others," catered to the city's children of color. The school moved to Saint-Phillip Street between Saint-Claud and Trémé in 1841, where it operated until 1846 and was "considered the most prestigious" school among elite *gens de couleur*. Séligny's students included Natalie Populus, daughter from a prominent family of New Orleans tailors and cobblers, and playwright Victor Séjour. Such students' families paid fees substantial enough to enable Séligny to purchase three homes between 1838 and 1847.[62] Cuban native Joseph Bazanac, who made up half of the teaching duo Bazanac & Marçiaq, was cited as running a school at 57 Bagatelle Street in 1842 and 1843. Almost a decade later Bazanac could still be found at this work when in 1850 he was listed as a teacher living in the household of Alfred Duhart, a free man of color whose family was visibly active in the community.[63] New Orleanian Michel St. Pierre began his career as a fencing master and part-time poet, contributing several verses to *Les Cenelles*. By 1846, however, St. Pierre had traded the sword for the pen, opening a school for children of both sexes.[64]

## ***Libres*' Common School**

Beyond such evidentiary threads, very little detailed information has survived as regards the students who patronized *libres* driven schools, nor of the curriculum followed therein. Interestingly, the one antebellum educator of color around which the most complete information has survived is the very man who confessed of his personal distaste for formal instruction, Armand Lanusse. Lanusse completed his education in France, and it seems that by 1852 had overcome his aversion to structured education as he took on the post of principal of *L'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents*, also referred to as the Couvent School, a position he held from that time until

[62] Frans C. Amelinckx, *Homme libre*, 15-16; Frans C. Amelinckx, «Social Christianity in Short Stories and Novellas of Michel Séligny,» *LHQ* 39 (1998); 66; Tinker, *Les Écrits*, 431.
[63] NOLA Directory, 1842; Tinker, *Les Écrits*, 297; Bell, *Revolution*, 105.
[64] Tinker, *Les Écrits*, 245-46.

his death in 1867. Even as schools such as Michel Séligny's Sainte-Barbe Academy excluded many students of color, if not by elitism then by mere fact of means, the Couvent School significantly expanded the community's capacity to formally educate young *gens de couleur* who otherwise could not afford such instruction. In an 1837 act of benevolence African-born former slave Justine Fervin Couvent laid the groundwork for a school expressly for children across the free community of color. Having come to New Orleans by way of Saint-Domingue, Madame Couvent was the widow of a prominent carpenter and free man of color, Bernard Couvent. Over her lifetime the Widow Couvent had shrewdly amassed considerable wealth in real estate, and, realizing "that it was necessary that the children of her race should not live without having some advantages of an education," she made provision in her will to donate a parcel of land "conditionally on the erection of a Colored Orphan Free School." The Widow Couvent's generosity not only laid the foundation for what would become *libres*' common school, but her bequest predated the adoption of the state's first free school act by a decade. However, negligence in the execution of the succession amidst the city's growing antipathy toward the education of persons of color postponed fulfillment of the widow's behest. After a decade-long delay, and due to the efforts of prominent *libres*, *L'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents* finally opened in1848, just one year after the implementation of the state-sponsored public school system.[65]

Popularly known as the Couvent School, *L'Institution Catholique* admitted scholars of both sexes "irrespective of religious creed," and the school employed up to half a dozen instructors of color. Orphans were accepted at no cost, "half-orphans" were taken at half tuition, and those who enjoyed the support of both parents and were able to pay were never charged more than fifty cents

[65] *History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute*, pamphlet, 1916, Charles B. Roussève papers, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana. The state of Louisiana's first common school act was adopted on May 3, 1847. Fay, *History*, 69.

in tuition each month.[66] Laura Ewen Blokker has noted of *l'Institution Catholique* that, "despite its appellation, which served to make the school sound more charity and church based – and therefore less threatening to those who opposed the education of African Americans – the school was neither solely for orphans nor run by the Catholic Church." Within a short time of its opening the board was receiving a steady stream of application letters from local parents and other adults invested in the community's youth, and these requests represented the interest of families of diverse financial circumstance. In 1853 Caroline Martin applied for her daughter Felicité; Mlle. Martin only claimed $400 in property in 1850. Likewise, Emilian St. Pierre was the head of a household of six who reported only $800 in property in 1850. In 1853 Mme. St. Pierre requested admittance of the couple's nine year old daughter, Ophelia, and son Anatole, seven.[67] Although the Couvent School made formal instruction available to the least resourced in the community, records do indicate that requests for admission were not limited to that class. For instance, the households of Mr. Estève and Mme. Glapion were noted to be faring somewhat better than the above applicants. Cited with $1,000 and $1,400 respectively, both applied for their sons to be accepted into the school. In the summer of 1852, wealthy businessman Nelson Foucher took issue with the board as to why, in light of his substantial aid in founding the institution, his two children had yet to be admitted. The directors voted that day to immediately reconcile the situation.[68]

The Couvent School appears to have provided an education worthy of competing with more costly private schooling while facilitating cooperation across the community of color. The school employed *gens de couleur* as teachers and school leadership, and respected *libres* served as

[66] Ibid. As of 1916: "The tuition at present are, orphans, free; half orphans, 25 cents, and other pupils, 50 cents per month." *History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute;* Also see Desdunes, 106.
[67] Blokker, "Education in Louisiana,"13.
[68] 15 Novembre, 1853, 1 Juin, 1854, 17 Juin, 1852, Journal de Séances pour L'Institution SS, Archives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA (AANO). The household of Nelson Fouché was cited with over $10,000 in property, Blassingame Census.

appointed board members. Notably, the first teacher and principal was free woman of color Félicie Cailloux.[69] The fact that a woman was placed in a position of such status at a time when head schoolmaster was still a male-dominated role is telling of Mme. Cailloux's qualifications; the relatively high rate of literacy in the city makes it difficult to conclude that she was given this appointment for mere lack of equally qualified male candidates.[70] When, in 1851, the board moved to hire a new *institutrice* and a second professor at the pay rate of $30.00 per month, they also sought to elect a new principal at a monthly salary of $35.00. Long time educator Michel St. Pierre's name was submitted as one apt candidate for the post of principal. In the end, however, the position was granted to Armand Lanusse, who took up his role in earnest. In May of 1853 Lanusse emphatically proposed that the school model its protocols after the state public school regulations, and that "those rules be followed strictly."[71] A few short months later a committee charged with weekly classroom visits reported:

> Our committee has the honor to inform you that, conformant to the order of the President, it has visited the school, both classes – those of the young ladies and those of the boys – two times each week. It reports that the instructors employ themselves with zeal, that the students fulfill their duties, and that studies continue with an activity that promises something of great satisfaction in the future.[72]

Courses at the Couvent School went up to the eighth grade level, and lessons were conducted in both French and English. Surviving assignments from students' English composition class give us a unique glimpse into their proficiency in what, for many, was likely a second language.[73] In April

[69] Desdunes, *Our People*, 104.
[70] A notable number of men of color were well-educated, and qualified as previous teachers, to take up this position. In fact, many names were submitted to the board as potential successors in 1851. Séances, 26 Avril, 1851.
[71] 26 Avril, 1851, Séances,. Roussève Papers, *Catholic Orphan Institute*; Séances, 4 Mai, 1853.
[72] Séances, 15 Novembre, 1853.
[73] Mitchell, *Freedom's Child*, 11. Many official documents were taken in French into the 1840s as were many local periodicals.

of 1858, in an imagined letter to classmate John Blandin, A.F. Frilot described the school's recently passed public examinations: "The last day of the examination was for us to declaim our pieces; Oh! It was pretty, you ought to have been there to see all the efforts they were making to recite well. There were a girl that had a piece of sixteen pages; another, of about thirteen. I do not know how they could keep that in their memory so well without missing three words."[74] Public exercises such as these were reflective of practices found in schools throughout the North and the South, as well as abroad. Indeed, as evidenced by such measures, the school visitation committee's prediction of gratifying student development was coming to fruition.

While adhering to the educational standards outlined by the pedagogy of the time, the opportunity that community members created in supporting this particular space provided something that more exclusive establishments could not, a sense of common purpose and point of unifying pride. The community's investment was evident in the sizable audience drawn to the public exercises; according to the young Frilot, "there were so many people to look at those children, that the hall and the yard were filled up."[75] The importance of this educational space is further evidenced by the many prominent figures who applied themselves toward its success. Businessman and board member Thomy Lafon's wealth was estimated at a considerable half a million dollars at the time of his death, and, among multiple charitable bequests, he left the school over five thousand dollars in cash, several parcels of real estate, and the rental for the maintenance of the school.[76] This annuity paid for teacher salaries, custodial services, taxes and insurance, and the general upkeep of the school's properties. Board members also included Antoine Dubuclet, whose skillful command of finance ultimately earned him the distinguished position of State

[74]A.F. Frilot to John Blandin Esq., April 30th, 1858, Mary Niall Mitchell, transcription of Catholic Institution Letterbook I and II, AANO.
[75] Ibid.
[76] *History of the Catholic Indigent Orphan Institute*; West Stahl, "The Free Negro in Ante-Bellum Louisiana," 319.

Treasurer from 1868 to 1879. Brothers Adolphe and Armand Duhart were both instrumental at the school in subsequent years as well; Adolphe held the position of principal and Armand served as director.

Importantly, the Couvent School not only united the community toward a mutual objective, but it created a space for *libres* from across the socioeconomic spectrum to contribute. In 1851 Joseph Rousseau, "son of one of the richest families of color," was placed in contention with Eugene MaCarty, noted son and heir of Barthelemy and Cecée MaCarty, for a positon on the board. Rousseau won by a vote of five to three.[77] Board membership was not the only opportunity *libres* had to participate, however, community members also rallied around the school's special programming. In the fall of 1851 the Institute was at work organizing a fundraising ball. Among those on the list of commissioners and subscribers were craftsman Joseph Dolliole and affluent elder Francois Escofier. Moreover, public examinations presented a project large enough in scope that the event's success required the outside assistance of a number of persons across the community. For instance, 1855 public examination exercises were organized with the cooperation of committee members such as well-situated carpenter Francois Bertrand and modest peddler Vincent Gonzales.[78]

Despite clear divisions of class within Louisiana's community of color, the rallying of those from diverse circumstances around the Couvent School suggests that affluent *gens de couleur* sought not simply to maintain their own status, but to also empower less resourced *libres* to obtain the academic skillset necessary for success within the larger community. There were

[77] 1 Julliet, 1851, Séances. Tinker, *Les Ecrits*, 424. Persons of Color in Louisiana Possessing More Than $200 in Property at the time of the 1850, 1860, and 1870 Census, Blassingame, John W. collection, 1831-1879, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana (New Orleans, LA); Roussève Papers, *Catholic Orphan Institute*. Also see Desdunes, *Our People*, 92-93, 74-75.
[78] In 1850 Joseph Dolliole was cited with $1,200 in wealth in 1850, Escoffier with $7,000; François Bertrand claimed $6,000 in wealth, while Vincent Gonzales only reported $300, Blassingame Census.

many opportunities for the education of free people of color in the city of New Orleans during this period, but few that served families of the lowest means. The Couvent School became *libres*' most well attended educational institution in antebellum New Orleans. Due to its prominence, the school was even periodically granted public financial support from the state legislature as well as from the City of New Orleans.[79] The Couvent School is illustrative of the ability of *gens de couleur libres* to establish a space for the pursuit of education on their own terms and largely without assistance from the white community.

**Other Opportunities**

The community of color was well aware of educational advances well before fashioning Couvent School protocol after the public system. Early on *gens de couleur* took advantage of contemporary pedagogical trends. At the turn of the nineteenth century just outside of London Joseph Lancaster innovated a plan for "monitorial" instruction by which older students, or monitors, trained the younger. As historian Carl Kaestle describes, by this system "children could be almost continually engaged in active, competitive groups." Lancastrian schools emphasized recitation, and the constant stimulation was thought to increase motivation while maintaining order in large schools with outsized student-to-teacher ratios. While Lancaster personally visited the northeastern United States in 1818 to promote his system, the trend made its way to New Orleans via France, where it appears that this system was being discussed well prior to Lancaster's tour. For instance, around 1800 Marquise P. de Pastoret wrote a letter to Clémentine Cuvier, the promising daughter of one of France's leading educational figures, on the organization of *écoles mutuelles* (mutual learning schools) based upon the London model. By 1822, while New Orleans

[79] Desdunes, *Our People*, 104; Sterkx, *Free Negro*, 269; Willey, "Education," 248.

boasted what must have been a sizable Lancastrian school for white students (employing at least six instructors), Bernard Louis was also conducting such a school for children of color.[80] Three years later Victor Mourey placed a January advertisement for the "*École d'Enseignement Mutuel - pour les enfans de couleur*" in *Le Courrier de la Louisiane.* The lengthy notice both touted the success of the school, and chastened parents for their negligence in enrolling their children:

> Any person who has eyes to see or ears to hear are easily convinced of the immense advantages of this school. Ask the students, their parents, any impartial person who visited the public examinations…. The pupils prefer their studies to their usual amusements; their parents, and especially those who had cause to complain of their children are surprised at the change they perceive in their behaviour. All judicious persons who attended the examinations and distribution of prizes were delighted at the proficiency of the pupils. The most Reverend Archbishop of Louisiana, who was pleased to have presided at the two ceremonies, publicly complemented the pupils on their extraordinary progress, (these were his own expressions) and their agreeable behaviour…. And you, who, persevering in your obstinacy, deprive your children of the precious advantages of a good education, beware the merited reproach, with which, one day, they shall be authorized to address you.[81]

It would seem that education was a matter of sufficient consequence that this school's endorsement from a high-ranking Church authority annulled the biblical directive to honor one's parents. Despite the favorable outcomes that Mourey professed, however, the Lancastrian system appears to have fallen out of vogue shortly thereafter. The method enjoyed wide support in France through the 1820s, waning toward the close of the decade, and the popularity of these schools in

[80] Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 40-40. Kaestle holds that the Lancastrian method was purported to enable one teacher to manage a school of up to 500 pupils. Mark Wilks and John Angell James, *The Flower Faded: A Short Memoir of Clementine Cuvier, Daughter of Baron Cuvier, With Reflections, by John Angell James* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1838); Marquise P. de Pastoret, "A propos des écoles mutuelles," 1800 (vers), Musée National de l'Éducation, Rouen, Fr.; 1822 NOLA City Directory.

[81] Translates as, "School of Mutual Teaching for children of color. "Ecole d'Enseignement Mutuel - pour les enfans de couleur," *Courrier de la Louisiane*, Janvier 1825. This advertisement was published in both French and English.

Louisiana appears to have mirrored those trends.[82] Nonetheless, educational opportunity for Louisiana's community of color was not premised on the vagaries of popular pedagogy, and schooling for the community persisted well after this method had been abandoned.

The relative mystery surrounding the education of this caste amid the broader narrative of black struggle means that most detailed information about the schools *libres* attended has been obscured in the bustle of history. Nonetheless, additional signs that antebellum *libres* were gaining at least the rudimentary training in the three R's are plentiful. In 1822 the New Orleans city directory cited a Julien L'Host employed as French teacher, and twelve years later it appears that this educator had expanded his offerings. According to a letter written by Jean Boze in 1834, L'Hoste had opened a boarding and day high school for colored students at 82 Esplanade Street in New Orleans. In relaying the opening of L'Hoste's school Boze recalled an amendment previously brought before the legislature by Senator Ducros – the effect would have been to fine any teacher who deigned to teach any free person of color to read or write. However, he relayed that upon hearing of the motion there was a great outcry in opposition, and in a spirit of philanthropy the legislative majority prudently struck the amendment down. The school took both boarding and day students, and it was said that it had "already been opened by a large number of pupils," causing Boze to ponder, "What must Ducros think of this school on Esplanade founded by L'Hoste?"[83]

The 1822 record takers' attention to tracking teachers in the capital city, as well as various other sources, give a telling glimpse into the number of institutions opened specifically to students of color during this period. In addition to Bernard Louis' Lancastrian school, Pierre Godet was listed as a "teacher of Coloured children," and teacher John Marsenat was listed in affiliation with

[82] Antoine Frost, *Histoire de l'Enseignement en France 1800-1967* (Paris: Librarie Armand Colin, 1968), 116-117.
[83] Boze, 1834, f. 238.12; 1834, 239.2; Ste-Gême Finding Aid, HNOC.

a school for persons of color on St. Charles Street. Additionally, Jean-Louis Marçiaq, one-time partner of teacher of color Joseph Bazanac, continued his work at the school of "Union and Love" in 1846, subsequently titled "School for both sexes, 2 Love" in 1852. The schools' names telling of Marçiaq's personal feelings about Louisiana social relations, he is known to have worked with students of color at these schools. Indeed, in 1847 Marçiaq was accused of the "abominable crime" of instructing Negroes. Marçiaq defended himself by asserting that he did not teach Negroes but *gens de couleur libres*, the distinction being that in the local idiom the term *nègre* implied an enslaved person. The instruction of free people of color was not, in fact, illegal. Marçiaq was clearly unabashed about throwing his lot in with the community of color as he also served as publisher for the interracial literary journal *L'album Littéraire* in 1843.[84]

Such schools were clearly a matter of public knowledge, apparently attracting pupils by word of mouth. At the same time, others turned to the press to reach out to potential students, and local newspapers were amenable to advertising for these schools. Like the *Courier*, *Le Propagateur Catholique* carried various endorsements for day and boarding schools. While it was customary for race to go unmentioned in these advertisements, an announcement for *l'École pour les enfants de couleur* made its first appearance in the paper in the spring of 1844. The school's announcement reveals a great deal about the place that education for free persons of color held in the community. Indeed, the notice for the school ran almost regularly from the spring of 1844 until July, 1845. In the advertisement M. Peter claimed that, given the Christian education received there and the progress of its students since its opening, *l'école* deserved the patronage of "the colored people who want to obtain a good education for their children."[85] Situated prominently

[84] 1822 New Orleans City Directory; Tinker, *Les Ecrits*, 431, 296-297; Bell, *Revolution*, 105.
[85] *Le Propagateur Catholique*, "École Pour Les Enfants de Couleur," 8 February, Center for Research Libraries: Chicago, IL.

amid notices for other schools and academies, the school differentiated itself as addressing the particular need for the religious instruction of the community's young men. In so doing, the advertisement alluded to the existence of other institutions for children of color, contending that families of color often complained of not having schools where their sons could be "raised in religious principles and practices." The school was open to students of both sexes, however, religious instruction through the efforts of the Catholic Church was available to young ladies of color only. Most other institutions open to young men of color apparently made little commitment to religious instruction. M. Peter maintained that he would apply himself "especially to inculcate in [his pupils] the principals of Religion and morality." In addition to the promise to provide a Christian education, Peter's school offered lessons in reading, writing, arithmetic, history, geography, book keeping, English, French, and Latin. The school seems to have been successful enough that in December of 1844, under the bold heading "SCHOOL For children of color," the advertisement notified potential patrons that it had moved to the corner of Royale and Esplanade, where it offered a vast enclosed and shady garden for the students' recreation (Figure 3). By

ECOLE

POUR LES JEUNES-GENS DE COULEUR.

Les familles de couleur se plaignent souvent de n'avoir pas d'écoles où leurs fils soient élevés dans les principes et la pratique de la Religion. Nous sommes bien aises de pouvoir leur faire connaître une école où ils pourront avec l'instruction procurer à leurs enfants la connaissance et l'amour des principes religieux ; c'est l'établissement de M. Peter, rue de l'Esplanade, encoignure Condé, No 77.

M. Peter est un homme d'un talent remarquable et formé à l'enseignement. Il sait inspirer aux enfants l'amour du travail et de l'étude, et s'applique spécialement à leur inculquer les principes de la Religion et de la morale.

Les branches enseignées dans cet établissement sont la Lecture, l'Ecriture, l'Arithmétique, l'Histoire, la Géographie, la Tenue des Livres, l'Anglais, le Français le Latin, etc.

Pour les conditions s'adresser au Directeur de l'établissement. 27av.

ÉCOLE

**Pour les enfants de couleur.**

L'Ecole pour les jeunes-gens de couleur, tenue par M. PETER, rue de l'Esplanade, près de la rue Condé; est transportée maintenant à l'encoignure des rues Royale et Esplanade. Le local, heureusement disposé pour un tel établissement, offre un vaste jardin, bien clos et ombragé, pour la récréation des Elèves. Le nombre des Elèves étant limité, le Chef de l'Etablissement prévient qu'il ne peut maintenant recevoir que six élèves de plus.

Cet Etablissement s'étant fait connaître, depuis qu'il est ouvert, de la manière la plus avantageuse, par les progrès des Elèves et par l'éducation chrétienne qu'ils y reçoivent, a des droits au patronage des personnes de couleur qui veulent procurer une bonne éducation à leurs enfants.

21déc—6f.

Figure 3

**"École Pour les enfants de couleur."**

*Le Propagateur Catholique* 27 Avril, 1844 and 21 Décembre, 1844

that time the school had grown to such an extent that it advised it could only accept six more students.[86] Had opposition to the education of Louisiana's people of color been as pronounced as in other communities across the north and south, such an institution certainly would not have so boldly announced its location and intentions. Education in the community of color was not a clandestine undertaking. Schooling for Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* was a widely-recognized norm.

In addition to this school, newspapers advertised several institutions, none of which explicitly mentioned race. Nevertheless, given the localities of these establishments, it is likely that some opened their doors to students of color. Housed in the French Quarter, *l'Ecole* for children of color eventually moved to within one block from the site at which Father L'Hoste was said to have opened his high school, which was within just a few blocks of the Couvent School (Figure 4). What is striking is that within just over one square mile of these schools, known to cater explicitly to *gens de couleur*, *Le Propagateur* advertised close to a dozen different learning

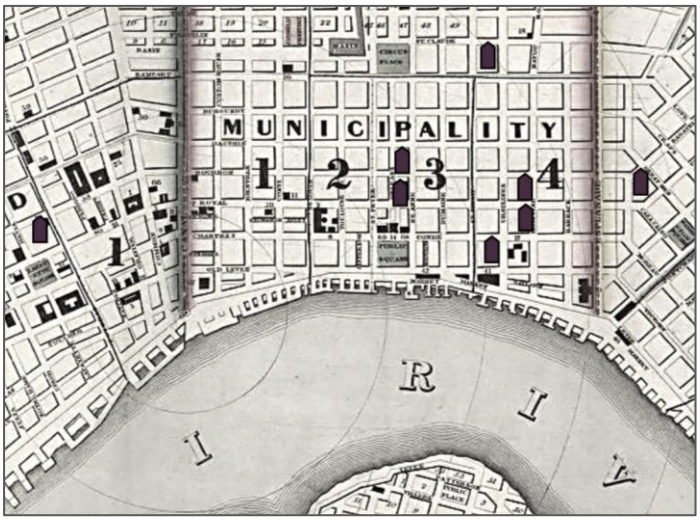


Figure 4
**Locations of New Orleans Schools Known to have Taught *libres* Students**

[86] "ECOLE POUR LES JEUNES-GENS DE COULEUR," *Le Propagateur Catholique*, 27 April, 1844; "ÉCOLE Pour les enfants de couleur," *Le Propagateur Catholique*, 8 February, 1845.

establishments between 1843 and 1844 alone. Some academies served as boarding schools for young ladies or young men, and there were also day schools, both single sex and coeducational. These various institutions provided instruction in French, Spanish, Latin, Greek, history and geography, writing, mathematics, physics, and astronomy.

One historian has said of Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* that, "like members of the white elite, leading free black families valued education, and like rich whites, they educated their children either by means of tutors or private schools."[87] While an accurate claim – *libres* utilized many of the same means for educating their children as did whites – such an assertion is misleading. To begin with, it only considers a small subset of Louisiana's community of color, obscuring the fact that many less affluent people of color also had access to schooling. Those who could afford to hire tutors or to send their children to elite private schools represented only a portion of those who were able to obtain a sound academic foundation in this antebellum society. In fact, those of more modest means were desirous, and capable, of grounding the next generation's prospects in literacy. As Armand Lanusse held, regardless of where in society fate had placed community members, from all sides a great need for training was felt. The value of academic instruction was understood and pursued beyond the topmost tier of Louisiana's community of color.

More importantly, claims like the one above assume that educational efforts within Louisiana's community of color expressed mimicry instead of desire. Framing this community's educational efforts as a reaction to white achievement masks the sincere interest people of color took in the comprehensive training of their own. The education of *libres* was not a response to

[87] Carl A. Brasseaux, Keith P. Fontenot, and Claude F. Oubre, *Creoles of color in the Bayou country* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 73.

white values or achievement, but a goal *gens de couleur* pursued in their own right. Indeed, Louisiana's community of color hardly lagged behind the white community as, during this period, regional opportunity for formal schooling was decidedly inadequate for all children outside of the moneyed elite. This was due in large part to several efforts, including the Catholic Church's early inclusion of girls of color, not after, but simultaneously with whites. In fact, for a time young women of color in New Orleans enjoyed greater opportunity than their white counterparts. In addition, the Couvent School, effectively *libres*' common school, was planned a full decade before the inception of Louisiana's statewide public school system. And while this institution brought formal schooling to those previously without the means to receive such instruction, the community of color's broad literacy predated even this venue. Indenture records reveal that within the forty year period prior to the opening of the Couvent School, just under 41% of apprentices of color came into their training already able to sign their names, and almost half were to be provided with schooling. Contrary to a narrow view of education reserved for the topmost tier of the free community, this data illustrates early and wide-ranging literacy, as well as the normalized pursuit of academic knowledge. Moreover, it reveals the community of color's relatively unfettered ability to acquire such competencies without the benefit of a traditional system of schooling. The claims of historians and others that libres educational efforts were a superficial imitation of white ideals is unfounded and deeply flawed. As with other free communities of color during this period, for Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* educational achievement was delimited by opportunity and driven by purposeful initiative.

## *"lire écrire et chiffrer convenablement"*: Apprenticeship, Agency, and Literacy

> *Noël Carrière, en considération de ce qui précède, s'oblige et s'engage à enseigner à son dit apprenti son état de Tonnelier, dans toutes les parties, sans lui en rien cacher ou déguiser. Comme aussi de lui fournir bonne et suffisante nourriture, boisson, logement… Le dit maître s'engage en outre conformeusement à la loi de faire enseigner au dit apprenti à lire, écrire & chiffrer.*
>
> *Noël Carrière, in consideration of the preceding, obliges himself to engage and to teach the above said apprentice the trade of Cooper, in all of its parts, without ever hiding or disguising anything from him. Likewise to furnish him with good and sufficient food, drink, and lodging…. The said master agrees moreover, according to the law, to ensure the said apprentice is taught to read, to write, and to cipher.*[1]

By the time of this 1824 indenture, free man of color Noël Carrière was an established tradesman who both trained novice *gens de couleur* as coopers and sponsored several family members to learn alternate trades. The wording of this particular agreement was common enough to be rote, and the call to provide the said apprentice with schooling unremarkable. According to a number of contracts, masters were specifically required to teach or cause said apprentice to be taught to, "*lire, ecrire et chiffrer convenablement*" (read, write, and cipher properly). What is noteworthy about these agreements was the application of such provisions to *gens de couleur libres*. By inclusion in the craft apprenticeship system, Louisiana's community of color was able to acquire education beyond standard schooling structures, which often excluded either by race or income.

The fact that persons of color were not inhibited in their participation in this system is significant as less affluent youths needed the practical training that apprenticeship provided as

[1] Edmond St Martin with Noël Carrière sponsored by Charles St Martin, V. 4, N. 73, 1824, Indentures.

much as they did literacy. According to John Murray, during the early nineteenth century formal craft apprenticeship was "among the most important institutions for transmission of human capital."[2] In antebellum Louisiana apprenticeship training provided young *gens de couleur libres* with intellectual tools that increased their literal and discursive social value. For both people of color and whites, common schooling had yet to flower in the South, and opportunities to gain basic reading and writing skills were more difficult to pursue for less affluent residents. Moreover, in the decades prior to the opening of the Couvent School, Louisiana's community of color experienced a broad gap in educational opportunity – formal instruction accessible by wealthy *libres* was largely unattainable for those who were not. Craft apprenticeship was essential to filling this gap by providing education for pupils from families of lesser means, enabling them to become productive, independent adults.

As with the Couvent School, education through craft apprenticeship was an aim around which the community rallied. In Louisiana, prominent tradesmen of color like Noël Carrière continually bound themselves in mutual obligation with protégés from families of varying financial circumstances, increasing young *libres*' access to training in skilled trades. During the space of his tenure the apprentice was to obey all of the master's just orders, and to not absent himself without permission. In turn, the master was obliged to teach the chosen trade "in all of its parts, and without ever hiding" any details of the craft. These obligations united community members across class, and provided ensuing generations the means for self-sufficiency and upward mobility. The arrangements made on behalf of these young people of color represented more than contracts between apprentice and master, they served as bonds of trust between those personally

[2] John E. Murray, "Generations of Human Capital: Literacy in American Families, 1830-1875," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27 (1997); 414.

committed to the youth's welfare and the tradesmen to whom they charged the community's future. These bonds of mutual commitment suggest that *gens de couleur* were at the very least sensitive to their common lot, aiding each other to the benefit of the entire community.

Indenture contracts bring the connections between community members across circumstance, as well as the high value the community of color placed on the preparation of the next generation, into relief. This chapter focuses on one collection of over 500 indentures contracted on behalf of young *gens de couleur libres* from 1810 to 1843.[3] Through these agreements we can see how the notable participation of apprentices of color in Louisiana's indenture system helped facilitate broader literacy attainment, occupational agency, and economic autonomy within the community of color. Unlike their counterparts in both slave and free states, *gens de couleur libres* were regularly able to use the indenture system to learn and subsequently participate in a number of skilled trades. Significant participation in the skilled labor market, in turn, brought financial stability to a number of households of color. Moreover, in Louisiana, parents and other sponsors personally concerned with the welfare of the community's youth, not state or local authorities, regularly operated as agents on their behalf.[4] These parties carefully attended to the terms and conditions of the indentures to which *libres* youth were subject, ensuring their adequate and comprehensive education. In addition to practical training, these sponsors used the indenture system itself to procure academic instruction for ensuing generations. *Gens de couleur libres* were educationally and economically successful due to their ability to extend

[3] Indentures. NOTE ON COLLECTION. This discussion will focus on young men of color as only a negligible number of girls of color (6) were included in this collection. Given such a low rate of female participation, it is reasonable to conclude that girls of color was not customary as it was in other regions.

[4] Compulsory apprenticeship was never instituted in the state of Louisiana, and the vast majority of indentures were sponsored by family members, tutors, or another person of color. Orphans were also largely sponsored by family or some other person of color. In fact, in only one instance is a government official clearly involved; in 1813 2 year old Celeste Williams was bound out by a customer house officer to learn to be a housekeeper.

educational opportunity across the community, and apprenticeship was essential to this expansion. Instead of serving as an alternative to formal schooling, apprenticeships both augmented and provided a means for academic instruction within the community of color.

Free blacks' ability to rely on training in skilled trades, let alone to reap the benefits of ancillary academic instruction, was as uncommon outside of Louisiana's borders as it was normalized within. If allowing participation in the system at all, indentures often served as a form of repressive custodianship, limiting rather than extending occupational opportunity for youths of color. A general distrust that parents of color were rearing their children properly led to compulsory apprenticeship in Delaware and Georgia. Hilary Moss has found that Maryland's apprenticeship system served an educational function for a significant number of apprentices of color, and some were even able to penetrate the skilled professions. However, the system was also used as a means of social control. Compulsory apprenticeship, instituted in 1793, empowered the courts to involuntarily bind out black children, and by 1817 the courts had eliminated the literacy requirement for black apprentices.[5] In fact, Maryland regulations dictating the treatment of apprentices was delineated explicitly on the basis of race, and, in regard to children of color, the law held that "if it shall appear upon examination before such court that it would be better for the habits and comfort of such child that it should be bound as an apprentice to some white person to learn to labor, the court shall bind such child as an apprentice to some white person."[6] Such

[5] Theodore Brantner Wilson, *The Black Codes of the South* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1965), 39; Moss, *Schooling Citizens*, 74, 88.

[6] Otho Scott and Hiram M'Cullough, *The Maryland Code: Public General Laws and Public Local Laws, 1860* (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co. Printers and Publishers, 1860). While the Orphan's Court was only entitled to forcibly bind out white orphans or those "suffering from the extreme indigence or poverty of their parents," it could summon the child of "any free negro." In addition, while the Court was obligated to bind white children out only to those who could provide reasonable schooling and education, it was held as unnecessary to "require that any education shall be given to such negro apprentice." Maryland State Archives, *The Maryland Code*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co., 1860), Article 6 Sec. 11, 15, 31, 36.

regulations narrowed free blacks' options in regard to the rearing of their own children, placing the prospects of at least some children of color at the discretion of white officials and masters. As Moss illustrates, a number of white masters were willing to provide additional literacy training; however, such opportunity was not granted by law.

In circumstances where young people of color were able to participate in the apprenticeship system, their differential treatment often meant many free people of color in slave and free states found little greater opportunity in apprenticeship training than they did in formal schooling. As Curry has held, in most cities the appearance of any black occupied as anything but an unskilled laborer, would have been, surprising and unsettling to most observers.[7] In his 1839 report on the *Condition of the Colored People in the State of Ohio* Isaac Knapp determined that, the state's laws blocked people of color from "those more lucrative and mental employments which are open to others." To exemplify the point Knapp relayed an incident in which the president of the Mechanical Association was publicly tried by his Society for helping a young man of color learn a trade, the prevailing feeling among white mechanics that "no colored boy could learn a trade or colored journeyman find employ."[8] In another case, a Kentucky carpenter of color, struggling to find work in Ohio, was at last employed by an Englishman. However, upon his entering the shop the workmen "threw down their tools, and declared that he should leave or they would," uniformly vowing that "'*they would never work with a nigger*.'"[9] According to one frustrated Philadelphia parent, "if a man of color has children, it is almost impossible for him to get a trade for them, as the journeymen and apprentices generally refuse to work with them." For most free blacks entirely

[7] Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 89, 90; Curry, *Free Blacks*, 21.
[8] Isaac Knapp, *Condition of the People of Color in the State of OH – 1839* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1839), 6, 8.
[9] Knapp, *Condition*, 8; Pennsylvania society for promoting the abolition of slavery, *The present state and condition of the free people of color, of the city of Philadelphia and adjoining districts, as exhibited by the report of a committee of the Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838), 10,12.

unavailable. Moreover, should a person of color acquire sufficient training in a skilled craft, the ability to freely practice that profession was proscribed by popular prejudice.[10]

In 1831William Lloyd Garrison implored attendees of the Second Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Color, "Wherever you can, put your children to trades." Garrison confidently held that, "when they once get trades, they will be able to accumulate money," contending that, "money begets influence, and influence respectability. Influence, wealth, and character will certainly destroy those prejudices which now separate you from society."[11] Having already turned to apprenticeship some decades before this entreaty, Louisiana's community of color, to some extent, illustrated the verity of Garrison's words. Of course, participation in skilled trades did not overturn the region's racial hierarchy as Garrison predicted for his northern audience. However, apprenticeship in this space did serve as a means of securing economic independence and respectability. Keeping with the spirit of Garrison's assertion, but turning the logic on its head, the positive characterization of *libres*, writ large, as respectable opened up pathways in their pursuit of skilled employment, just as it did in their endeavors toward schooling. This forbearance allowed those who could not afford private schooling or tutors to be able to pursue alternate avenues to practical knowledge and literacy.

Creole white Louisianans not entirely subscribing to the attitudes that rendered Garrison's entreaty so urgent, Louisiana's particular historical and social context presented a space in which

[10] Curry, *Free Black*, 19. Not only did such measures foreclose opportunities for free blacks, but they also served to funnel people of color into low-skill, low-paying professions. Contrary to what one would expect, Leonard Curry has found that greater occupational opportunity for free people of color existed in those places where slavery enjoyed a tighter grip. In his examination of occupational opportunity for free black populations within fifteen antebellum cities, in fact, Curry found the percentage of blacks working in low-opportunity professions decreased in the lower South while participation in high-opportunity occupations increased. The reverse was true the further North one went, Curry, *Free Black*, 44, 25.

[11] Quoted in Woodson, *Education of the Negro*, 111; Theodore W. Schultz, "Capital Formation by Education," *Journal of Political Economy* 68 (1960).

*gens de couleur libres* could more openly participate, and thrive, in skilled trades. Significantly, this educational milieu remained open to *libres* due to the same social and civil realities that enabled *gens de couleur* to be regarded as "enlightened by intelligence." The early willingness to train enslaved Africans in skilled trades proved fundamental to the occupational opportunities enjoyed by *libres* in generations to follow. As Daniel Usner has found, as early as 1727 slaves in the Louisiana territory were apprenticed to skilled craftsmen to learn trades such as carpentry, blacksmithing, and masonry. Curry has further asserted that southern urbanites consequently became accustomed to the presence of black artisans and did not perceive craftsmen of color as strange or threatening. This social acceptance meant that "young black males were much more likely to secure apprenticeships that would enable them to enter these same trades."[12] Over one hundred years after the first slaves were apprenticed to white artisans, Louisiana's free men of color flourished in the professions practiced by their predecessors, including blacksmithing, masonry, and carpentry, among other occupations.

Apprenticeship was the essential means by which fundamental skills in marketable crafts could be passed from one generation to the next, and the inclusion of young *libres* in this practice played an integral role in the training of community members who relied not on inheritance but on their own industry for financial independence. Indeed, a mid-nineteenth century comparison of occupations of free blacks and mulattos in Louisiana to those held by the same group in the non-slaveholding states of Connecticut and New York revealed over 1,000 laborers in each of the two northern states, while Louisiana indicated only 411 of its free class employed as such. *Gens de couleur libres* distinguished themselves as able blacksmiths, shoemakers, barbers, tailors, and joiners, and an inordinately high number of *libres* worked as carpenters, masons, and

[12] Usner, "From African Captivity," 34; Curry, *Free Black*, 35.

cabinetmakers. In 1856 the *Western Watchman* reported that, "of the free colored population in New York City, sixty were clerks, doctors, druggists, lawyers, merchants, ministers, printers, and teachers." The periodical further held that, proportionally, in New Orleans 165 free people of color were engaged in pursuits, "which may be considered as requiring education" for every 11 who were not.[13] By 1850 there were more free men of color over the age of fifteen working as doctors, jewelers, upholsterers, sailmakers, or students than as servants – census takers noted only four free people of color working as such in 1850.[14]

In Louisiana, opportunity to train in a trade was evidently not lacking, a reality that seems to have been understood even beyond state lines. In one account, a young man in Ohio sought in vain to place himself in an apprenticeship. Hoping for better success, his brother traveled to New Orleans, where he "readily found a situation."[15]As with schooling within the community, *gens de couleur* were not trained in the shadows of Louisiana society. Apprenticeship in the region operated as a predictable part of a young man's development. In fact, by law such agreements received final certification at the pen of the mayor himself, and between 1809 and 1843 over 500 apprenticeships for young people of color were endorsed by New Orleans' top official. The indenture system, moreover, was a mode of instruction utilized by whites and people of color alike. Paul Lachance has determined that both groups entered into these contracts in relatively equal numbers, with about 475 contracts for white males to just over 500 total agreements for young

[13] "Emancipation at the South – The Tolerance of Louisiana," *The African Repository* v. 32 (American Periodicals, 1856), 276. The periodical compared this 165:11 ratio to New York's ratio of 1:55 free blacks employed in skilled : unskilled occupations, 277.
[14] Indentures; *Seventh Census*; Mary Gehman, "Visible Means of Support: Businesses, Professions, and Trades of Free People of Color, "in *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*, ed. by Sybil Kein, 208-222 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000); *Seventh Census*, Occupations of Free Colored Males over fifteen years. The census also lists a greater number of *gens de couleur* over fifteen working as students, seven, than as servants. It is likely that this number is inaccurate, but the mere fact that reporters' low accounting is telling of disinclination to reflexively view people of color to be servants.
[15] Knapp, *Ohio*, 8.

men of color during the same period.[16] The very regularity of these legally-sanctioned agreements is indicative of the common understanding that even Louisiana's less favorably positioned youth should receive some training in order that they might not become a burden upon the community. As with the 1829 manumission of young Charles, in which the Police Jury granted emancipation on the condition that the petitioners "learn him to read and write [and to] learn him a trade, so that the said negro boy may provide for his living," it was expected that young *libres* be properly educated to become productive adults.[17]

## Training the Next Generation

Overall, such arrangements appear to have served at least one of two primary purposes for young men of color: as preparation for a vocation by which they could support themselves, and as a means for academic instruction. The fundamental aim of sponsors, the local government, and to varying degrees the master and apprentice, was that at the end of the agreed upon term an apprentice would have ample knowledge to, in turn, earn reliable income working in a stable trade. In 1806 the "Act for the regulation of the rights and duties of Apprentices and Indentured Servants" outlined the official language notaries were to use in drawing up apprenticeship contracts. Interestingly, although absent from the prescribed verbiage, one condition was included with decided regularity: the master was obliged not only to teach the apprentice the designated craft in all of its parts, but he must "never hide or disguise" any part of that trade from the apprentice. This stipulation formalized the expectation that masters would not render a craft so enigmatic that the

[16] John E. Murray, *The Charleston Orphan House: Children's Lives in the First Public Orphanage in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013). The majority of indentures were for young men, very few girls were represented in this collection. Paul Lachance, Index to New Orleans Indentures, 1809-1843, http://nutrias.org/~nopl/inv/indentures/ind-intr.htm#resource . Note: Lachance's calculation is not exact as it appears he did not account for all indentures in this collection.
[17] Emancipation petition of Norbert Soulié, Number 166, 1829, Petitions.

apprentice might never grasp the mysteries he was bound to learn. Under the safeguard of this obligation apprentices worked with tradesmen across race and class, training in an array of vocations including saddler, ship carpenter, and sailmaker (Figure 5).

Contrary to the plight faced by would-be artisans of color in places such as Philadelphia and Ohio many of New Orleans' white craftsmen openly trained young *libres* in skilled trades without fear of public censure. Over 300 *libres* apprentices voluntarily worked with white tradesmen in crafts ranging from bricklayer to tinsmith, and some well-connected youths were even able to train in more specialized trades. Sponsored by his aunt, Louis Lefèvre was apprenticed to Jean Giguel in 1812 to learn to be a goldsmith. Artisan Louis Couvertie provided the same opportunity to Andre Williams in 1817 and again to Jean Lucas the next year; Couvertie's two charges were to additionally train as jewelers. In 1815 John Goldenbow took on Bernard Marigny's natural son, Hypolite Jean Marigny, to train as a cutler, and Jean Baptiste Duval was apprenticed to Silvain Gautier for the same. Jean Bazanac bound out his twelve year-old natural son Alphonse Bazanac to learn to be a printer and typesetter in 1817. The younger Bazanac's training apparently proved fruitful as the New Orleans City Directory designated him as a printer by 1832, and he could yet be found practicing that craft eighteen years later, in 1850. In addition, despite a law that any free person of color bearing arms be required to carry a certificate proving freedom, Jean Baptiste Duval was trained as a gunsmith in 1818 and in 1821 Joseph Ancard was also to learn this art.[18] To a significantly greater degree than in other antebellum contexts, these young men of

[18] Louis Lefèvre with Jean Giguel sponsored by Marie Duc, V. 1, No. 43, 1812; Jean Lucas with Louis Couvertie sponsored by Papotte Lucas, V. 2, No. 127, 1817; Hypolite Marigny; Jean Baptiste Duval with Silvain Gautier sponsored by Antoinette Bornodo, V. 2, No. 15, 1815; Joseph Ancard with Christopher Biot sponsored by François Ancard, V. 3, No. 218, 1821; 1832 NOLA City Directory; Blassigame Census, 1850. Alphonse Bazanac with Jean Leclerc sponsored by Jean Bazanac, V. 2, No. 123, 1817, Indentures; Joseph Ancard with Christopher Biot sponsored by François Ancard, V. 3, No. 218, 1821; Jean Baptiste Duval with Bernard Dupuy sponsored by Marguerite Pineau, V. 3, No. 8, 1818, Indentures; Bullard and Curry, *Statute Laws*, Black Code Sec. XXI.

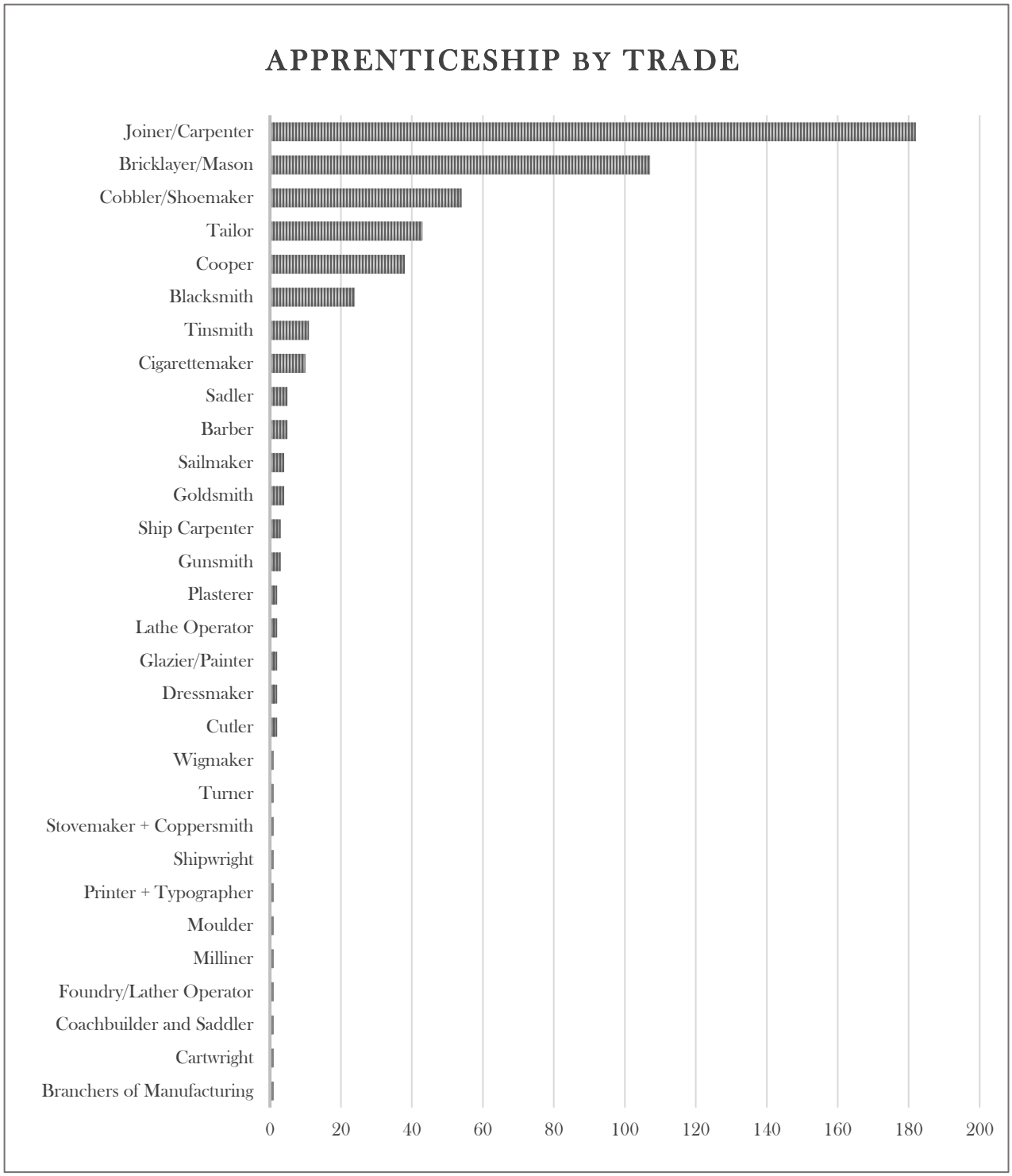
APPRENTICESHIP BY TRADE
Joiner/Carpenter
Bricklayer/Mason
Cobbler/Shoemaker
Tailor
Cooper
Blacksmith
Tinsmith
Cigarettemaker
Sadler
Barber
Sailmaker
Goldsmith
Ship Carpenter
Gunsmith
Plasterer
Lathe Operator
Glazier/Painter
Dressmaker
Cutler
Wigmaker
Turner
Stovemaker + Coppersmith
Shipwright
Printer + Typographer
Moulder
Milliner
Foundry/Lather Operator
Coachbuilder and Saddler
Cartwright
Branchers of Manufacturing
0
20
40
60
80
100
120
140
160
180
200

Figure 5

color were able to selectively work with white craftsmen and learn high-skill and potentially lucrative trades.

Like Duval and Ancard, in 1829 fourteen year-old Leon Lindos was to learn to be a gunsmith; Lindos, however, was bound to free man of color Adolphe Duhart. In fact, in a handful of noteworthy instances racially determined roles were reversed and white apprentices trained under masters of color. Louis Simon, Jean Rousseau, and partners Cherubin & Dessources all contracted to train white apprentices to be joiners and cabinetmakers. Gabriel Lobo was apprenticed to Dubreuil & Honoré to become a tailor, and Louis Sarle's father bound him to Francois Pascal to train as a tinsmith. Significantly, of nine white youths apprenticed to free men of color all were sponsored by a parent, and in three instances apprentices were to take up household under their masters. Records indicate, further, that these young men did not necessarily hail from the bottom of white society. Six apprentices were able to sign their names at the beginning of the indenture, indicating that some expense had been put toward their prior education. As in other aspects of antebellum Louisiana society, one's positon within the social structure could be quite fluid and relationships were not always racially determined.[19]

White parents placing their sons with masters of color is exceptional, but for *libres* apprentices such an arrangement was, in fact, not uncommon. Craftsmen of color were proportionately quite active in their training roles. Although the *libre* population averaged around 15% of Louisiana's total free population from the 1830s through the 1850s, over 41% of *libres* apprentices trained under a free person of color. The proportionately outsized role that these craftsmen played in educating would-be craftsmen of color is particularly significant when one

[19] Gabriel Lobo with Dubreuil and Honore sponsored by Petronille Lobo, V. 4, No. 283, 1830; Louis Sarle with François Pascal sponsored by François Sarle, V. 5, N0. 422, 1838, Indentures.

considers that Maryland law explicitly directed that the Court bind apprentices of color to white masters. That so many in Louisiana were placed under the care of masters of color is unsurprising, however, when one considers that *gens de couleur* were known to have predominated in multiple trades. By 1850 this class had distinguished themselves, among other crafts, as shoemakers and masons. Indeed, Erasme LeGoaster worked as a prominent New Orleans tailor and clothier for over two decades, and by 1850 he was classified as the wealthiest free person of color in the city, owning at least $150,000 in property. LeGoaster also took in at least six young men to be apprenticed as tailors between 1813 and 1828.[20]

Notably, in the decade prior to the Civil War just under 550 of this class were working in some form of carpentry, from the finer details of furniture and cabinetmaking to the management of large construction projects. Louisiana was home to several successful *libres* contractors, architects, and builders, and at least a few, such as Nelson Foucher, Jean Rousseau, and Jean Louis Dolliole, mentored young *gens de couleur* in related trades. Over the course of eighteen years noted craftsmen Louis Simon and Dutreil Barjon contracted indentures with at least ten apprentices each, both imparting the mysteries of joining and cabinet making. A native of Haiti having arrived in New Orleans in 1813, Barjon himself had been apprenticed to wealthy builder, Jean Rousseau. Impressively, Rousseau had, within the course of a decade, taken on no less than twenty-eight apprentices, and in so doing helped incorporate many young men from Saint-Dominque and Cuba into New Orleans' community of color. Such formal agreements, made across economic status, allowed for the transfer of skills that could be exercised in the pursuit of material gain.[21]

The proliferation of *libres* craftsmen in these fields was a matter of accepted course in New

[20] Blassingame Census, 1850; Indentures.
[21] *Seventh Census*; Blassingame Census, 1850; Indentures.

Orleans, and the evident and persistent example of successful men of color predominating in certain skilled trades likely had a positive effect on young *libres*' sense of self-worth and ambitions. Indeed, to the disquiet of watchful outsiders, the prominent position held by these craftsmen was a reality on open display in the streets of New Orleans. During his travels Berquin-Duvallon noted that a large number of *libres* lived within the city, occupying themselves in the mechanical arts, "for which," he held, "they have great aptitude and little attachment."[22] Olmstead confirmed Duvallon's depiction as he recounted one New Yorker's disgust at this evident circumstance: "He said I could see any day in Canal Street, 'a most revolting sight' – Irishmen waiting on negro masons. He had seen, one morning as he was going to his work, a negro carrying some mortar, when another negro hailed him with a loud laugh: 'Halo! You is turned Irishman, is 'ou?'" Although comic in the retelling, it is unlikely that such an account was an exaggeration; 107, or 21% of the apprentices of color in this study, trained in masonry and bricklaying – preparation that translated into a workforce of 325 masons of color by the middle of the nineteenth century.[23]

The expertise *gens de couleur* claimed in particular trades certainly made them desirable as mentors for the next generation of novices. Indenture data, moreover, reveal that dominance in these trades was not the result of chance; apprenticeship played a clear role in opening up and sustaining occupational pathways for young *libres*. As it was for masons of color, liberal access to proper training developed a pipeline of skilled craftsmen that reinforced the ranks in number and reputation. Even as one generation entered the workforce older artisans remained, exponentially increasing the influence of *libres* in such trades (Figure 6). Over a thirty-three year period 43

[22] See Gehman, "Visible Means"; Indentures; Duvallon, *Vue de la Colonie*, 253.
[23] Olmstead, *Cotton Kingdom*, 297; Indentures; *Seventh Census*.

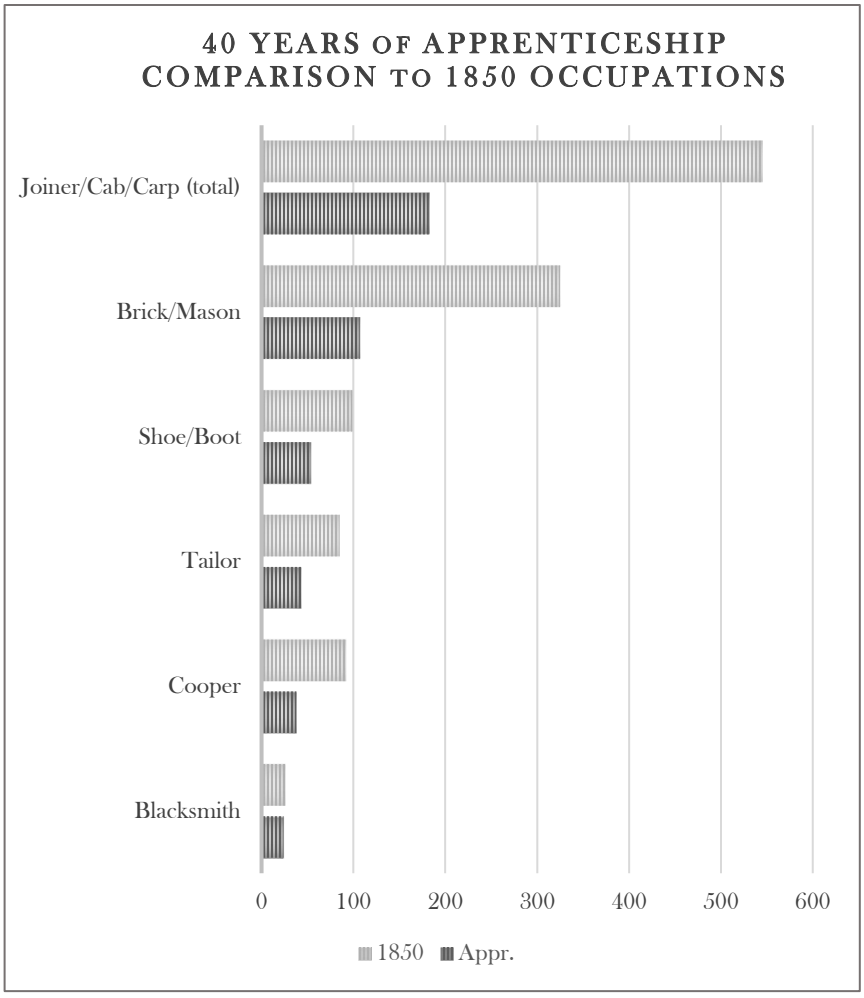


Figure 6

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apprentices of color were trained as tailors and 54, just over 10%, as cobblers or bootmakers. As a result, Louisiana cited 85 people of color occupied as tailors and 99 employed as shoemakers by 1850. Above all, 182, over 35% of all apprentices of color during the same time period, trained as joiners, cabinetmakers, or carpenters. Consequently, nearly three times that number were said to be working in those trades by the middle of the century.[24]

Certainly, for such a system to sustain itself former apprentices must not only find

[24] The one notable exception to this trend was the number of *libres* formally training as cigar makers, which was proportionately much lower than those working in that field.

employment in the profession for which they trained, but at least some must then mentor others. Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* did both. Louis Carlon bound himself to tailor Francois Skinner in 1816, and in 1832 the New Orleans City Directory reveals that Carlon had acquired the skill necessary to be listed as a tailor. In 1827 Francois Valentin *fils* was indentured to prominent tailor Erasme LeGoaster; some twenty-three years later Valentin was himself situated as an established New Orleans tailor. Additionally, Louis Brunel, Guillaume Lavigne, and Gustave Estève could all be found working in the respective trades for which they had trained – bricklayer, saddler, and mason – as many as twenty years after their tutelage. At least with respect to the trades that white Louisianans had become accustomed to seeing performed by *gens de couleur*, this class was able to establish themselves in long-term careers as skilled craftsmen.[25]

Once established in their fields a number of these craftsmen subsequently took up the instruction of the next generation. The ability of craftsmen of color to in turn train others, not only attests to the preparation they themselves had received, but to their desire and ability to train younger community members. Taking on a significant proportion of *libres* apprentices, master craftsmen of color played an instrumental role in the education of the community's young men. Tinsmith Jean Baptiste Snaër began his training in 1818, and in 1829 served as master to Pierre Volmart. Likewise, once novice bricklayers Florivalle Thézan and Joseph Firmin subsequently passed on the art of bricklaying, "in all of its parts," to their own novices.[26]

[25] Louis Carlon with Joseph Joly sponsored by Etienne Bertel, V. 2, No. 61, 1816, Indentures, 1832 NOLA Directory; François Valentin Jr. with Erasme Legoaster sponsored by François Valentin, V. 4, No. 187, 1827, Indentures, Blassingame, 1850; Louis Brunel with William Brand sponsored by Adelaide Brunel, V.1, No. 65, 1812, Indentures, Passports; Guillaume with Pierre Alexandre Gullotte sponsored by François Lavigne, V. 3, No. 139, 1819, Indentures, 1832 NOLA Directory; Gustave Estève with Jean Chaigneau sponsored by Marie Estève, V. 4, No. 202, 1827, Indentures, Blassingame, 1850.

[26] Jean Snaër with Marin Bross sponsored by Eugene Fligue, V. 3, No. 82, 1818; Pierre Volmart with Jean Snaër sponsored by Elizabeth Popote, V. 4, No. 260, 1829; Florivae Thézan with Maurice and Pinson sponsored by Philippe Thézan, V. 3, No. 138, 1819. Note: transcribed as Florivae, but signed as Florivalle; Augustin Gustave with Thézan and Cie sponsored by Isidore Leveille, V. 4, No. 289, 1830; Joseph Firmin with Nelson Foucher sponsored

While masters of color opened up opportunities for young *gens de couleur* to study a craft, such arrangements proved mutually beneficial. Successful artisans profited from the assistance interns could provide, as unskilled pupils were able to perform the everyday tasks necessary to sustain and grow the master's businesses. Hence, some masters became productive enough in their own practice to be able to take on multiple apprentices at once. Ten years after contracting with shoemaker Jean Beauchamp *hcl*, Manuel Barrière signed an agreement with his first apprentice Joseph Michel in 1830, promising to teach him the art of making women's shoes. Whether or not Michel's tenure went favorably, Barrière took on two more apprentices in 1838 and 1839. Just five years after beginning his own training cabinetmaker Edouard Bajolière engaged his first apprentice in 1823, subsequently adding two more the following year.[27]

Having studied under white journeyman Nicholas Murray from 1818 to 1824, blacksmith Joseph St. Amand (also recorded as St. Amant) proved even more ambitious in his role as mentor. After the conclusion of his own training St. Amand surfaced in the record as master to Jean Baptiste Averin in 1827, René Alexander and Francois Johnston in 1830, Charles Smith the following year, and another Joseph St. Amand the year after.[28] The support of so many novices would have required that St. Amand brought in sufficient work; however, the labor of these trainees would also have permitted greater productivity. Overall, the role that master craftsmen of color played in providing training to the community's young men certainly gave would-be craftsmen the tools to

by Firmin Perrault, V. 4, No. 175, 1827; Nelson Herveux with Joseph Firmin Perrault sponsored by Margueritte Menard, V. 5, No. 353, 1833, Indentures.

[27] Manuel Barriere with Jean Beauchamp sponsored by Constance Barriere, V. 3, No. 204, 1820; Joseph Michel with Manuel Barriere sponsored by Marie Louise, V. 5, No. 307, 1830; Edourd Bajoliere with Thomas Willard sponsored by Belzamiure Lavouliere, V. 3, No. 32, 1818; Pierre Porchereau with Edourd Bajoliere sponsored by Cocotte Arnaud, V. 4, No. 40, 1823; Aleide Dominique with Edward Bajoliere sponsored by Rosine Leroux, V. 4, No. 66, 1824; Andre Tepsier with Edmond Bajoliere sponsored by Eloise Escot, V. 4, No. 79, 1824, indentures.

[28] Joseph St. Amand with Nicholas Murray sponsored by Magdeline Brazier, V. 3, No. 62, 1818; Jean Baptiste Averin with Joseph St. Amant, 1827 Urene Alexandre with Joseph St. Amant, 1830; François Johnston with Joseph St. Amant, 1830. Note: Archive transcribed as Urene, indenture signed René; Charles Smith with Joseph St. Amant, 1831; Joseph St. Amant with Jose St. Amant, 1832.

take advantage of occupational opportunity within the larger community. It is difficult to quantify to what extent the mentorship of craftsmen of color increased the capacity to train young *libres*. It is, however, safe to conclude that it is unlikely that the broader community's acceptance of *libres*' participation in skilled trades alone would have translated into such an active effort to train these young men. It is clear that craftsmen of color training these novices at such proportionately high rates significantly increased the community's strong representation in the skilled trades.

While names from Louisiana's wealthiest families of color occasionally appeared on indentures as master or sponsor, they were decidedly absent in the role of apprentice. This formal system was utilized largely by those who existed between the affluent and impoverished extremes of the community, and as such this training served various purposes beyond vocational preparation. For some, apprenticeship mediated the educational gap between primary schooling and one's eventual vocation. For instance, prior to traveling to France to complete his education, Armand Lanusse was apprenticed at the age of fourteen to learn the craft of cabinetmaking. Lanusse could already sign his name by the time of his indenture, yet he may have been still too young to travel abroad alone. Prior to studying at the French Medical Academy Charles Roudanez spent time in New Orleans receiving a practical education and earning the funds necessary to pursue his chosen field of study.[29] Although providing training in a particular trade, indentures also generally prepared young *libres* for the workforce. The training one received during the process could provide a means to broader occupational opportunity across vocation. Even as a number of apprentices found success in their studied trades, others transferred their skills to alternate employment. Louis Augustin bound himself to become a bootmaker in 1815; however, by 1850

[29] Arnaud Lanusse with Jean Conrad sponsored by Froisine Wiltz, V. 4, No. 180, 1827 Indentures. Note that the archive incorrectly transcribed name as Arnaud. Signature clearly shows Armand; Rouzan, "Roudanez," 54.

he was working as a butcher and was said to have $5,000 in property. Pierre Dupin also trained to be a shoemaker, but instead found financial security as a broker claiming $6,000 in holdings by 1850. While not ultimately working in the vocations they initially set out to learn, these *libres* likely gained competencies that allowed them to become successful in their ultimate professions.[30]

The incorporation of people of color into the apprenticeship process, as well as their ability to then openly practice skilled trades, was instrumental to the community of color's widespread and long-enduring occupational and financial independence. Training for employment in skilled trades was a means for economic mobility and financial stability for those not included in the community's moneyed elite, and these individual advantages accrued to elevate the economic status of the overall caste. We can see this in the ways that participation in skilled trades helped to incorporate Caribbean immigrants into the community, reinforcing not only creole *libres*' cultural ways, but the community's earning power. For instance, born in Haiti, Dutreil Barjon immigrated to New Orleans, was trained under wealthy builder Jean Rousseau, and in turn took on at least ten apprentices of his own. Others, like cabinetmaker Pierre Talhand and carpenter Jules Serres, hailed from the West Indies and by 1850 claimed $3,000 and $2,000 in property respectively. In fact, by the decade prior to the Civil War a number of New Orleans' most financially secure Caribbean born *libres* could be found living in households that collectively claimed over $170,000 in wealth, a number of these inhabitants occupied in skilled trades.[31]

On the whole, by the time of the *Seventh Census* the wealth attributed directly to those practicing trades that required some specialized training accounted for almost 25% of the wealth

[30] Louis Augustin with François Bosse sponsored by Catiche, V. 2, No. 16, 1815; Pierre Dupin with Lambert sponsored by Simon Dupin, V. 2, No. 75, 1814, Indentures; Blassingame Census, 1850.
[31] Altogether, over 115 apprentices over the thirty year period under consideration hailed from the Caribbean. Indentures; Blassingame Census, 1850.

claimed by New Orleans' community of color (Figure 7).[32] This number, moreover, does not account for those who were listed in households in which the wealth was cited under some other party, nor those who were no longer participating in the work force. For instance, apprenticed by his father to be a sailmaker in 1816, by 1850 Joseph Gravier was retired at the age of 65 – he was noted to have $2,500 in property, roughly $73,000 in current day terms. Having enjoyed a successful career as a tailor Erasme LeGoaster shifted his efforts to real estate in his retirement.[33] Hence, education was more than a matter of *libres*' respectability, lessons learned through apprenticeship cultivated community members' abilities into skills transferrable beyond a particular trade.

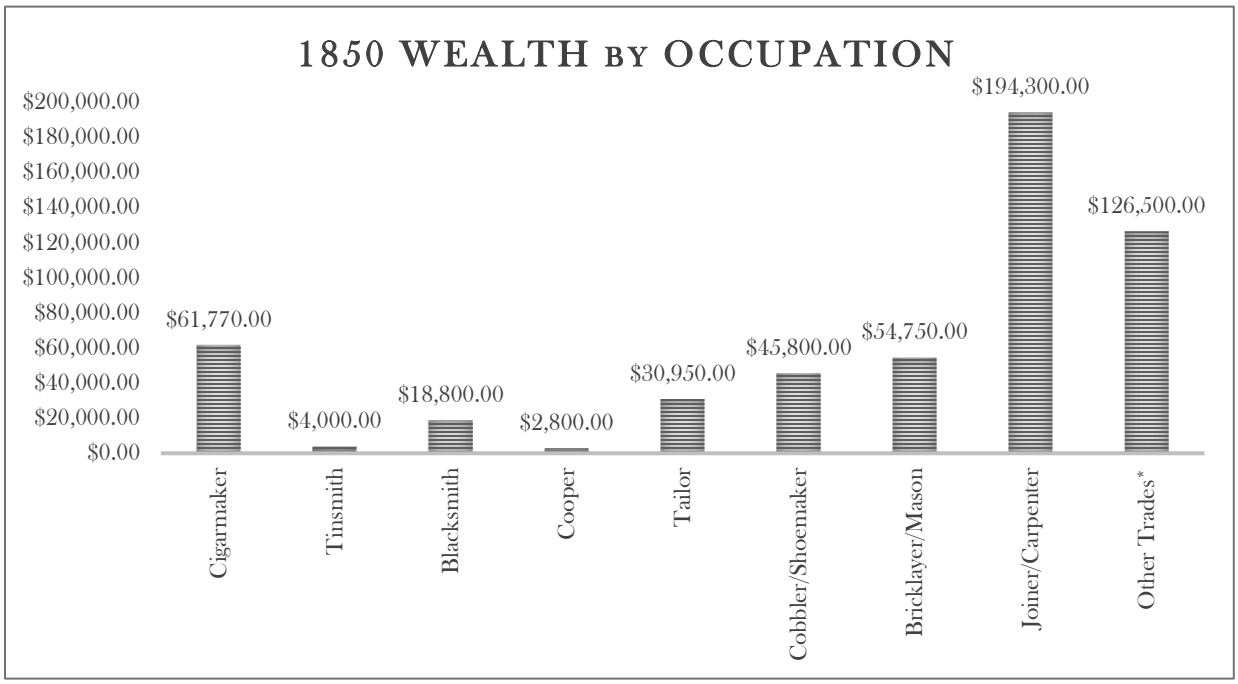


Figure 7
*Includes painters, butchers, brokers, clerks, and gunsmiths.
(Amounts represent 1850 values)

[32] Blassingame Census, 1850. These trades comprised $539,670 of roughly $2,226,000 in wealth consolidated within households said to have $200 or more in 1850. The wealth of these tradesmen amounted to over $14,000,000 in current day dollar value. http://www.in2013dollars.com/1850-dollars-in-2014?amount=2500
[33] Joseph and Louis Gravier with François Skinner sponsored by Nicolas Gravier, V. 2, No. 73, 1816, Indentures; Blassingame Census, 1850.

**Apprenticeship for Literacy**

In addition to financial stability, perhaps one of the most important functions that apprenticeship served in the education for Louisiana's community of color was to further normalize the academic instruction of free persons of color across class. Apprenticeship records reveal not only the opportunity for young men of color to learn a skilled trade, but also illustrate an expectation of literacy at the culmination of that training. Due to Louisiana's unique convergence of law and custom, formalized apprenticeships opened up an important means for less affluent *gens de couleur* to obtain basic scholarly instruction. That the local community had seen *gens de couleur* both in schools and skilled trades from the colony's earliest days habituated them to such realities. Apparently seeing the value in preparation along both lines, the1806 Act regulating the rights and duties of apprentices dictated that an apprentice should be instructed in the three Rs:

> In every case where any person shall be bound in any place, where there shall be a school established, either as an apprentice or servant, who shall be under the age of twenty-one years, there shall be a clause in their indentures binding the master or mistress, to teach or cause to be taught the said apprentice or servant to read and write, as also to instruct him in the fundamental principles of arithmetic.[34]

In specifying that all three basic academic skills should be taught, and in not making any racial distinction, this condition enabled *libres* apprentices who could not otherwise afford private school tuition the means by which to acquire at least some formal instruction. From the earliest arrangements contracts included provision that novices of color be taught to read and write.

While in Louisiana adherence to legal statutes was predictably inconsistent, this directive

[34] "An Act for the regulation of the rights and duties of Apprentices and Indentured Servants, approved May 21, 1806," in Bullard and Curry, *Statute Laws*, 17-18.

appears to have been one which many observed. Records reveal that the literacy provision was regularly included in contracts for New Orleans' apprentices of color. Conformant with the law, just under 49% of the contracts for these apprentices stipulated that the master provide said apprentice with some formal scholarly instruction. Certainly, the provision alone does not indicate faithful compliance; however, a closer look at these contracts suggests an earnest desire that apprentices acquire these skills. To begin with, literate assistants would have served many masters as well it suited an apprentice and his family. As John Murray observed in his examination of the apprenticeship of Charleston orphans, literate apprentices, as indicated by the ability to sign their names at the time of indenture, were more desirable – entering his training with this skill allowed the apprentice to begin a step ahead of the basics.[35] Even if an apprentice did not possess these skills at the time of indenture, it would have been to the benefit of the master for his training to attend to their acquisition.

Masters further appear to have been likely to follow the educational provision as indentures reveal the proliferation of literacy within the community of color, and affirm the ability to read and write as a community value. The indentures consulted between 1810 and 1843 reveal that parents were able to sign their names at a lower rate than their children, meaning that, in these cases, it was unlikely that literacy was acquired in the home. As Main suggests of New England prior to the rise of the common school, without a reliable system of schools, a concerted investment in academic instruction would have been necessary for young New Orleanians to have entered into indentures showing such signs of literacy.[36] Therefore, the time spent gaining these skills prior to

[35] Murray, *Charleston Orphan House*, 159-160. Hilary Moss has also found that, in Baltimore, masters valued literate workers, *Schooling Citizens*, 77, 82-84.

[36] Carl F. Kaestle, "The History of Literacy and the History of Readers," *Review of Research in Education* 12 (1985); 2. It is important to note that there has been some scholarly debate regarding whether the ability to sign one's name is a reliable measure of a person's literacy. The question is whether such capability is indicative of broader literacy, conceptualized as the ability to read and write. Scholars agree that the inability to write did not

being bound out represents an evaluative choice.[37] In Louisiana, only a small number of *libres* apprentices were apprenticed between the early ages of six and eleven. The majority were bound from ages twelve to sixteen, allowing them time to acquire some instruction prior to learning a trade (Figure 8). Likewise, Caribbean refugees brought with them a value for education in keeping with that of creole *libres*. Over half of Caribbean-born apprentices were literate upon entering into their indentures, and they exhibited decided fluidity in their writing at relatively young ages. Taken altogether, *libres* indentures reveal that a significant number of sponsoring community members were willing to bear the opportunity cost of forfeiting the value of an apprentice's labor in favor of instruction.

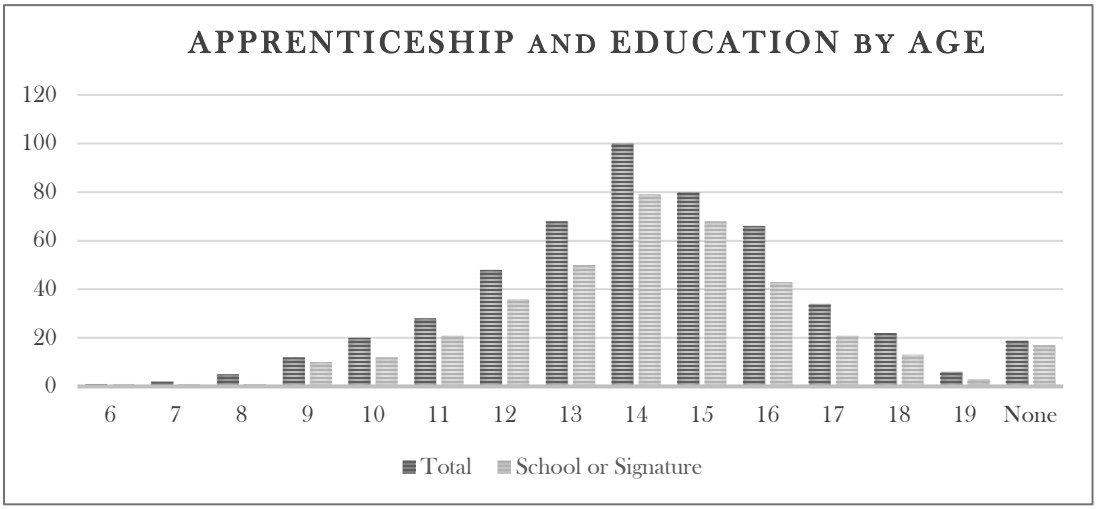


Figure 8

necessarily preclude the ability to read, meaning that literacy rates based solely on signatures may exclude some who could read. As Carl Kaestle has held, there may have been many who marked with an "X" yet could read. On the other hand, Kaestle has surmised that it is unlikely that the reverse was true. Barbara Main parses this conclusion further, contending that writing began only after a pupil had learned to read with some facility: "Thus, the ability to sign one's name required a sufficient length of time in school or a purposive investment of time and money." The ability to sign one's name suggests of instruction sufficient to have imparted at least basic literacy. Given that evidence of reading proficiency might yet show even higher literacy rates than indicated through the ability to sign one's name, signatures can give us a reasonable picture of an individual's ability to read and write. Gloria L. Main, "An Inquiry into When and Why Women Learned to Write in Colonial New England," *Journal of Social History* 24 (1991); 579, 580.

[37] Theodore Schultz has theorized that time spent on schooling was time that students, and the community at large, forewent earnings: pupils could otherwise "be employed producing (other) products and services of value to the economy, for which they would be 'paid'; there is, then, an opportunity cost in going to school," Schultz, "Capital Formation," 573.

That the majority of apprenticeship agreements were sponsored by someone who had a personal interest in the future advantage of the apprentice, and who planned their training accordingly, was integral to the educational paths of these youth. In fact, parents appear to have played the single most important role in establishing young *libres* in skilled trades. Of roughly 520 agreements, over 360, roughly 70%, were sponsored by a mother or father. Notably, a number more were arranged by aunts, uncles, or grandparents. In fact, over 85% of indentures initiated between 1810 and 1843, including agreements made on behalf of orphans, were sponsored by a family member.[38] Moreover, many family members sponsored multiple blood relations over time. Prominent New Orleanian Noël Carrière sponsored two of his nephews and his grandson, and free man of color Edouard Jenkins entered all three of his sons into various trades. From the documents it is clear that M. Jenkins was vigilant in his sons' scholarly development. All three, like their father, could sign in a clear and fluid hand, and two were to have additional schooling during their training (Figure 9).[39] Like his father, Dutreil Barjon *fils* learned the furniture making craft and took over his father's business operations upon the elder's retirement to Paris in 1856.[40] Several masters of color were also sponsoring parents, enlisting their sons to learn trades other than their own. For instance, shoemaker Maurice Populus indentured his son Henry to learn to be a bricklayer, and tinsmith Francois Pascal sponsored his son in the trade of turner.[41] Although these men could have trained their sons in the family trade, they were comfortable enough to allow them

[38] Of 510 agreements, 435 were sponsored by a blood relative. I include in this figure 5 godmothers and 4 godfathers; "to teach said apprentice to read, write, and calculate properly." Notably, orphan apprentices, of which there were less than 7%, were also proportionally indentured under the same condition as other apprentices – that the master, *faire enseigner au dit apprenti à lire, ecrire & chiffrer*.
[39] Auguste Jenkins with Valentin Syler sponsored by Edward Jenkins, V. 2, No. 34, 1815, Julien Jenkins with Nicolas Murray sponsored by Edward Jenkins, V. 2, No. 44, 1816, Bizinte Jenkins with Valetin Syler sponsored by Edouard Jenkins, V. 3, No. 40, 1818, Indentures.
[40] Henry Populus with Joachim Courcelle sponsored by Maurice Populus, V. 5, No. 348, 1832, Indentures.
[41] Leonard Pascal with Patrick Donoho sponsored by François Pascal, V. 5, No. 319, 1831, Indentures.

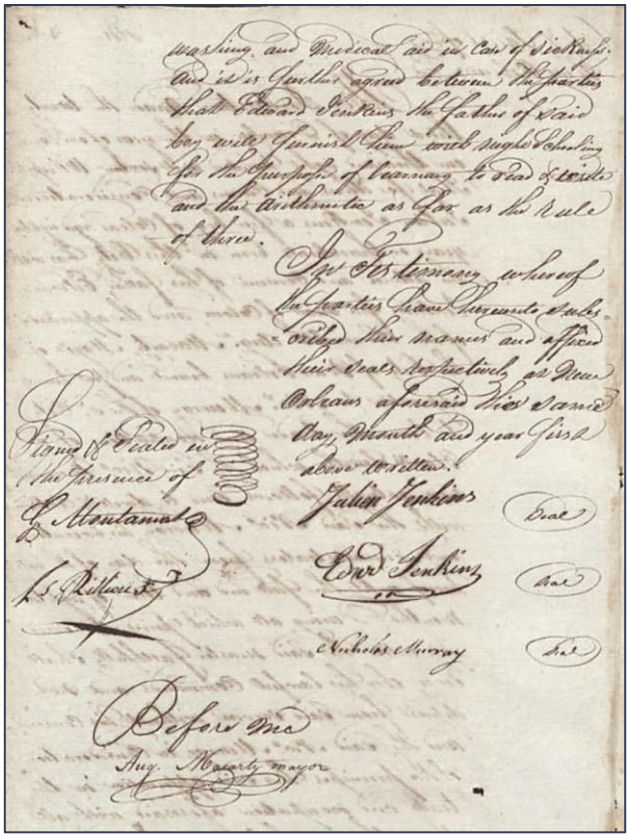

Figure 9

**Signature Page of Indenture of Julien Jenkins, December 23, 1816**

New Orleans (La.) Office of the Mayor. Indentures, 1809-1843. Louisiana Division/City Archives, New Orleans Public Library

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to train in other occupations. The confidence that these craftsmen placed in this system on behalf of their own children illustrates their faith that those to whom they entrusted their young would fulfill the obligations of their role. Sponsors appear to have felt assured that the apprentice would, to satisfactory measure, have gained the skills outlined in the legal contract.

Such arrangements further strengthened the bonds between households of color as well as with craftsmen in the white community; even as apprentices typically moved into the master's household, many parents maintained control over some aspect of an apprentice's rearing. For instance, in 1832 Antoine Saulet *hcl* apprenticed his nineteen year old son Narcisse to train as a blacksmith. Narcisse Saulet's indenture stipulated, however, that should the apprentice fall ill during his term, "he should be transported to his father's house to be treated." Other parents, such

as Louis Duhart, chose to maintain charge of most, if not all, of their child's necessities. Young Fortunée Duhart's *hcl* indenture indicated an arrangement between the parties that the youth would "remain lodged with his father and mother," and it continued, "it is equally agreed that in the case that Louis Duhart comes to leave the city, he will be entirely authorized to take his child with him."[42] In such cases parents remained engaged in their children's care and development, and both households became bound together in raising the next generation.

The high rate of sponsorship by those personally tied to the apprentice, therefore, figured favorably for the education of these young men of color. Unlike apprenticeships initiated by public officials or contracts negotiated by uninterested individuals, or at times the apprentice himself, sponsors invested in a youth's success consistently weighed the long term benefits of the apprentice's preparation. In Louisiana indenture agreements either made provision for some payment to the apprentice, or for schooling; rarely did an apprentice receive both. Given this circumstance, literacy in general was often deemed of greater importance than immediate monetary gain. Nearly half of all contracts for apprentices who could not sign their names at the beginning of the obligation, indicating no prior education, included a provision for formal instruction. More importantly, almost as many apprentices could already sign their names at the time of entering into the agreement, and yet a number were to receive additional schooling. For many sponsoring *libres* the opportunity for schooling far outweighed quick income. Concerned parties who were financially able evidently saw to the next generation's scholarly training prior to submitting them to the tutelage of a master craftsman, and many who could not afford such schooling used apprenticeship as a means to finance an apprentice's formal instruction.

[42] Narcisse Saulet with Antoine Bourjeau sponsored by Antoine Saulet, V. 5, No. 341, 1832; Fortuné Duhart with Corderiolle and Lacroix sponsored by Louis Duhart, V. 4, No. 132, 1825, Indentures.

To illustrate this point, of 263 apprenticeships sponsored by the youth's mother or grandmother between 1810 and 1842, 128 required literacy instruction. Representing almost 50% of all contracts sponsored by these women, this number only tells a part of the story, however. At the same time, 118 apprentices of color sponsored by a mother or grandmother could sign their names at the time of indenture, indicating some prior instruction. In 1811 Modeste Foucher placed her fourteen year old son, Dorestan Cortesse, under the care of Latour and Laclott to learn the trade of bricklayer. Although the youth confidently signed his name "D D Cortesse," the notary stipulated that Mlle. Foucher's son be taught his trade "without neglecting the most essential points such as reading, writing, and arithmetic."[43] On the other hand, twelve year-old Jean Pierre Emery was not to receive schooling through his indenture as the contract noted he had already received such under the care of his mother, Francoise Trudeau. Young Emery's sure, steady hand verified the claim. In fact, only 67 of these contracts (25%) neither contained provision for the apprentice's schooling nor the apprentice's signature. That is, despite the fact that sponsoring mothers were only able to themselves sign the contracts at a rate of roughly 20%, almost three-quarters of their sons had either acquired some education prior to entering into the commitment, or the binding agreement was used as a means to garner an education for these young men.[44] While the apparently low literacy rate on the part of these women may suggest that schooling was not a parental priority, the high rates with which they saw to their sons' preparation illustrates otherwise. And concern for

[43] "sans négliger les points plus essentiels tels que lecture, écriture, & arithmétique," Dorestan Cortez with Latour and Laclott sponsored by Modèste Foucher, V. 1, No. 13, 1811.

[44] This reality certainly highlights the disparity between male and female literacy during this time. This requires much more consideration; however, evidence discussed in this study suggests that low female literacy was normative during this period. Notably, there was little opportunity for girls outside of the elite caste to acquire a scholarly education, and girls were largely excluded from apprenticeships. Of the indentures I've found, there were only six female apprentices; 2 cabinetmakers, 1 milliner, one dressmaker, and 2 for housework. Two of these young women were promised schooling, Indentures. Notably, apprenticeship was a means of preparation for less affluent inhabitants. It is likely that literacy rates for those women of more privileged economic status were literate at much higher rates. We can see from the rates of attendance at the private Catholic schools cited that the benefits of such an education were limited to only those with sufficient means.

young *libres'* scholarly education extended beyond the apprentices' mothers; the same trend was consistent overall. On the whole, across almost every age group, the vast majority of apprentices of color could either sign their names or were granted some provision for schooling in order that they might learn to do so (Figure 8 and 10).[45]

The attention that sponsors paid to the scholarly preparation of young *gens de couleur* highlights the value that this community placed on such skills. Indeed, 15% of apprentices could already sign their names at the time of indenture and were also granted additional schooling. This represented over half as many youths as those who were neither literate nor provided with schooling.[46] Free man of color Joseph Agustin *père* was serious enough about his son's schooling that he was even willing to pay for half of the expenses, and other parents likewise agreed that they would bear the cost of schooling. The majority of sponsors, however, placed the cost of academic training on the master – not necessarily because they found it an unworthy investment, but because,

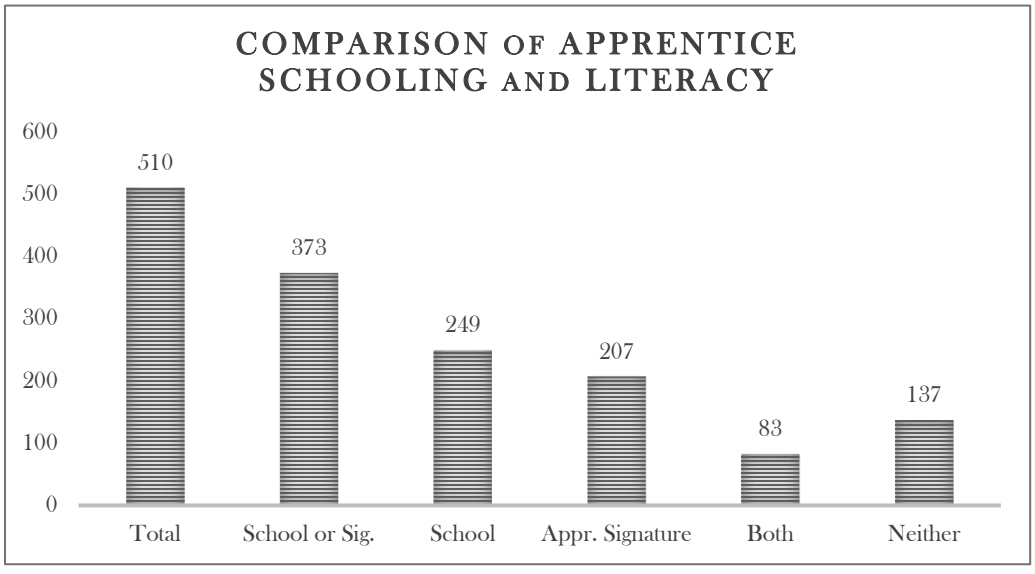


Figure 10

[45] Almost 49% of these indenture contracts provided for schooling, and just under 41% of apprentices could sign their names. Overall, accounting for the overlap of those that could both sign and were granted additional schooling, over 73% of apprentices had either had prior scholarly training or were to be provided such through their apprenticeship.
[46] Indentures.

in Louisiana, the long-held custom that apprentices acquire such skills as a part of their training applied equally to people of color. In addition, this provision enabled those who lacked the means to pay a tutor or private school tuition an opportunity to secure at least some literacy training for their children. Prior to the opening of the Couvent School apprenticeship in antebellum Louisiana rendered the inability to pay tuition at a private academy less consequential to educational opportunity, and even after the School's opening *gens de couleur* of lesser means utilized apprenticeship as a part of their children's comprehensive training. In 1859 Couvent School student John Blandin wrote that he had returned from break to find some of his fellows "retired from school." Blandin supposed it was to enter them into a trade, citing that Roger was learning "how to shave properly a gentleman's chin," and Aristide was to become a shoemaker.[47] *Libres* not only used the indenture system to pragmatically train the next generation in particular trades, but as a part of a broader curriculum of academic and vocational preparation.

**Apprentice Schooling**

Apprenticeship records in conjunction with census data make it clear that less affluent *libres* strove, with notable success, to learn how to read and write properly. Yet, with scant surviving data on schools that enrolled *gens de couleur libres* it is difficult to conclusively ascertain where these pupils acquired their scholarly training. Nonetheless, indentures do begin to bridge this gap. First, it is notable that a little over half of those who could sign their names at the time of indenture were sponsored by someone who could also sign her or his name.[48] This indicates that many had the opportunity to learn from someone within their intimate circle. At the same time, it suggests that a significant number of pupils would have had to acquire such skills outside of the

[47] November 24th, 1856 – February 27, 1861, Letterbook AANO.
[48] Of 115 apprentices who could sign their names at the time of indenture, only 64 were sponsored by someone who could be reasonably deemed to have been literate, Indentures.

home. The ability to pursue such instruction seems to have been a matter of common knowledge as indentures often went beyond standard verbiage to outline, if not specific locations, the terms of schooling. That is, the conditions outlined by sponsors went beyond stipulating that the apprentice be taught to read, write, and calculate; they specifically required that the apprentice be sent to *school*. For instance, orphan Edouard Barthelemy was to be sent to school two times each week, while twelve year old orphan Jims was to receive "at least three years" of schooling. Valmont Fondin and Theodale Castillon, among many others, were each to receive one year of schooling. Jean Arnaud, who could already sign his name, and Nicholas Antoine, who could not, were both ensured two years of formal instruction.[49] Other terms ranged from three months to as many as three years, the most common being between six and eighteen months.

Such records also give us some indication as to the nature of the schools that may have served these students. Apprentices clearly could not devote productive business hours to academic studies; therefore, they would most likely have enrolled in classes that were accommodating to the master's budget and business operations. M. Boylan's *Classe D'Écriture*, advertised in *Le Propagateur Catholique* in the mid-1840s, would have been one such institution. Boylan promised to transform the most irregular and informal handwriting to a "free, easy, and elegant hand" within twelve writing lessons. At a one-time fee of $10.00, and allowing students to continue on until satisfied, this school would have allowed apprentices to use these lessons variably over an extended period of time.[50] It also would have allowed the master to teach the most rudimentary aspects of the alphabet and spelling before turning the apprentice over to a paid instructor.

[49] Edward Barthelemy with Louis Loutrel sponsored by Dominique Barthelemy, V. 1, No. 10, 1811; Valmont Fondin with François Bosse sponsored by Cherry Chamois, V. 3, No. 86, 1818; Theodule Castillon with Henry Mercier sponsored by Jeannete Marigny, V. 3, No. 75, 1818; John Arnaud with John Sharp sponsored by Marie Catherine Boress, V. 3, No. 117, 1819; Nicolas Antoine with Louis Gilles sponsored by Felicite Marie Joseph, V. 3, No. 131, 1819, Indentures.
[50] "Classe D'Écriture," *Le Propagateur Catholique*, 27 Janvier 1843.

Academies like M. Boylan's would have, to some extent, tailored their curricula to their particular students' needs. For example, several institutions advertised English language courses, as the ability to do business with a growing English-speaking population was becoming ever more essential. In fact, in 1828, the natural son of Jean Boze's long-time correspondent and employer was learning a trade. By 1829 Boze informed that the young man was learning English, which he held had become a necessity. Apprentices would have also been sent to classes on bookkeeping, a skill beneficial to any business, and indispensable for any apprentice who might one day manage his own shop.[51]

In light of an apprentice's primary obligations, the most common mode of instruction for these students was night school. A cursory glance at newspapers of the day provides evidence of the regular operation of evening classes in and around New Orleans. It would be easy to assume that such classes were reserved for older adults; however, taken together with indenture records these advertisements reveal that such courses were more commonly fashioned to cater to young persons who were otherwise occupied during business hours. In 1858 the *New Orleans Daily Crescent* reported that there were as many as 1,500 pupils attending night school, affirming that, "by their employments," these pupils were unable to attend the day schools.[52] To that end, indentures regularly contained language that specified that the apprentice be sent to "*école de nuit*" or "*du soir*," with over 45% of contracts that included a school provision stipulating this venue. In 1828 Marie Joseph Pierre adeptly negotiated that Louis Lemoine would regularly pay her son the sum of five piasters per month during the entire term of the apprenticeship, "and moreover, send him to night school." Saddler and coach maker in training, Jean Louis Auguste, was to have "night

[51] Summer 1830, f. 143.6, Boze; "Langue Anglais, Ecriture et Tenue des Livres," 19 Novembre, 1842, *Le Propagateur Catholique*; "Cours D'Anglais," 13 Novembre, 1842, Le *Propagateur Catholique*.
[52] "Public Night Schools," *New Orleans daily crescent*, July 23, 1858, http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/. Note that this number likely only included white students eligible to attend the public school.

schooling three or four months in the year, as [his mother] may find it more proper."[53] Some were to attend for an allotted time each year, while others were simply to be sent "regularly to night school." Presumably in order to avoid any confusion, Jean Gourjon specified that his son Felix Gourjon attend school in the summer from 7:00 to 9:00 in the evening.[54] Such stipulations underscore the understanding that both formal schooling and professional training were important to an apprentice's development, and that one need not be in contention with the other. Moreover, these conditions highlight a common knowledge that formal schooling was an option readily available to students of color.

To satisfy the demand for off-hours instruction, multiple schools were advertised. M. Boylan's *Classe D'Écriture* was one such offering, operating for young men specifically from 7:00 to 9:00 in the evening. As early as 1810 Madame Martin advertised the opening of the *Maison D'Education* in *Le Courier.* The school served young ladies during the day, and it was advised that "Mr. Martin will also open on that same day a school for young persons between 6:00 and 9:00 in the evening." Beginning in 1842 *L'Institution Classique et Commerciale*, located at both 53 Bourbon Street and 92 Rue Dumaine, advised those who wanted to acquire practical knowledge of the English language, the art of bookkeeping, and to cultivate attractive penmanship that it would be open every evening from 6:00 to 9:00. M. Matton and M. Francoz joined forces to offer day and evening classes in 1843; they informed that "in order to accommodate young persons who cannot follow the course during the day, there will be, as in the past, an evening class." By 1844 the partnership had apparently dissolved, but the school continued on under the direction of M.

[53] Derinsbourg Raphael with Louis Lemoine sponsored by Marie Joseph Pierre, V. 4, No. 219; Jean Louis Auguste with François Gaudy sponsored by Pelagrie Moulin, V. 1, No. 64, 1812, Indentures.
[54] Felix Gourjon with Joseph Mary sponsored by Jean Gourjon, V. 3, No. 172, 1820, Indentures.

Matton.[55] For more advanced students A.P. Emile D'Obernay's school offered the most comprehensive evening program, mirroring that of his day school. From 6:00 to 9:00 D'Obernay offered a standard curriculum as well as subjects ranging from algebra and geometry to history and literature.[56]

It is important to note that none of these institutions explicitly addressed the inclusion, nor exclusion, of persons of color. However, the consistent directive that apprentices of color be sent to school, without at any point naming a particular institution, indicates that there was ample and well-known opportunity for these pupils. It is more than likely that some of the establishments advertised would have accepted persons of color as they did whites, and equally likely that locals understood exactly which those were. According to the evidence, the same social attitudes that allowed so many young *libres* to enter into apprenticeships and to openly practice skilled trades also enabled them to take advantage of diverse opportunities to acquire basic literacy before and during their practical training. The relative silence about the education of *gens de couleur libres* on the part of local inhabitants of both races alludes to a general acceptance of this community's education, a response consistent with Louisiana's social and economic structure during the early nineteenth century.

**Widespread Literacy**

Indenture records tell us about education for Louisiana's community of color beyond the desire that young *libres* acquire, at minimum, basic literacy and math skills; they indicate that in this context academic aspiration bore the possibility of being realized. All indentures required the

[55] "Classe D'Ecriture," *Le Propagateur Catholique*, 27 Janvier, 1843; "Langue Anglaise, Ecriture et Tenue Des Livres," 19 Novembre, 1842, *Le Propagateur Catholique*; "Institute de Jeunes Gens," *Le Propagateur Catholique*, 6 Janvier 1844; "Maison D'Education," Octobre, 1810, *Le Courrier de La Louisiane*; 1842 "MM. Francoz et Matton," *Le Propagateur Catholique*, 3 Juin 1843.
[56] "Maison D'Education Dirigée Par A.P. Emile D'Obernay," *Le Courrier de La Louisiane*, 29 Nov. 1845.

consent of the master, sponsor, and apprentice, confirmed either by signature or mark if the party was unable to sign. Hence, through these contracts we can get some sense of literacy's reach into the larger community. To begin with, of 212 apprentices of color who were indentured to craftsmen of color, over 195 worked under *libres* who were able to sign their names. By this measure, the vast majority of these tradesmen of color appear to have been literate. While many like Berquin-Duvallon may have attributed *libres*' success in particular trades to natural aptitude, literacy certainly figured into their ability to conduct profitable enterprises. Surviving ledgers and receipts further verify this acumen as they illustrate the regular, meticulous tracking of debts owed, accounts settled, and payments received.[57] *Gens de couleur* succeeded in business not merely due to innate talent, but as a matter of training and study.

Further, indentures reveal the ease with which some sponsoring *libres* could sign their names, indicating that at least minimal educational opportunity had been available across multiple generations. Overall, sponsoring parties of color who could sign were in the minority, only about 25%; however, these sponsors illustrated the extent to which literate persons of color were educated beyond the ability to sign their names. Apparently deeming the conditions outlined by the notary of her son's agreement insufficient in clarity, herself having been absent, Pauline Heville appended a letter written in her own hand. Heville specified that her son Alexis was to be provided with clothing and any necessary medical care during the entirety of his indenture, and under these terms granted her authorization of the contract. She ended her missive with a gentility customary to correspondence of the day: "I have the honor of being with respect, Sir, your very

[57] Johnson Papers, Auguste Metoyer Papers, Mss. 871, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.; Meullion Family Papers, Mss. 243, 294, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.; Metoyer Family Papers, Mss. 836, 837, 846, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

humble servant."[58] Indeed, the elegant script exhibited by most in this literate minority suggests that Mlle. Heville was not unusual in her fluency.

While the number of literate sponsors may appear low, it is significant that so many apprentices subsequently entered into their training literate, and that so many more were contractually granted some schooling. The abilities of one generation do not appear to have definitively determined those of the next. In one case the mother, unable to sign, enlisted the apprentice's sister to authorize the agreement on her behalf. The signatory endorsed, "theraise volairs for my mother who does not sign."[59] As more capital (human and financial) was consolidated within the community of color during the early part of the nineteenth century, younger *libres* experienced greater opportunity to learn skilled trades as well as the means to receive academic training. Apprenticeship as an educational tool strengthened networks within the community of color. This system not only solidified bonds of trust between masters, sponsors, and apprentices, but it created bridges between community members and educational institutions. In turn, the skills and knowledge produced by these arrangements established a means by which *gens de couleur* could become an independent and productive part of the larger society. This broader social capital delayed the cultural, economic, and educational marginalization that would ultimately leave Louisiana's community of color with less freedom of action after emancipation than during slavery.

[58] "J'ai l'honneur d'être avec respecte, Monsieur, Votre très humble servante," Alexis Heville with Michel and Lemoine sponsored by Pauline Heville, V. 3, No. 173, 1820, Indentures.
[59] Alexandre Desbrosses with Louis Lange sponsored by Etiennette, 1812, Indentures.

## Conclusion: "Fixed as that of an Inferior"

*He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.*

~ W.E.B. Du Bois ~

*The African race are strangers to our Constitution, and are the subjects of special and exceptional legislation.*[1]

~ Louisiana Supreme Court, 1860 ~

Antebellum Louisiana's particular French and Spanish cultural origins influenced the ways in which race was perceived, constructed, and perpetuated in the region. Within this space people of color were held to be "respectable from their intelligence" and were, even as a degraded class, granted a number of civil rights. The region's *gens de couleur libres* enjoyed a sustained period of civil protection and economic independence, enabling them to be distinguished as "so far from that degraded condition" relative to people of color in other states. This liberal characterization made it possible for *libres* to demonstrate the favorable qualities attributed them. Fortified by massive emigration from Saint-Domingue and Cuba at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the dominant French social structure that granted *libres* the ability to accumulate property, to defend their interests in the courts, and to educate their children as far as their means allowed held fast for several decades thereafter. The relative material success of this caste under such circumstances rendered their presumed degradation less absolute.

[1] *African Methodist Episcopal Church v. the City of New Orleans*, 15 La. 441 (1860) in Paul Finkelman, *Religion and American Law: An Encyclopedia*, Edited by Paul Finkelman (New York: Garland, 2000), 5.

Ultimately, however, *libres*' aspirations were in direct opposition to the submissive station whites envisioned for people of color within society. Even while *libres*' ability to advance their material interests were left largely unhindered during the antebellum period, by the colony's earliest dictates free people of color were to never "presume to conceive themselves equal the white" and to "yield to [whites] on every occasion."[2] As American sensibilities and the planter elite gained in power, earlier understandings about the definitive condition of persons of color in Louisiana society were supplanted by the guiding principle of white supremacy. By the 1850s *libres* faced increasingly restrictive laws that forced them closer to the enslaved than the free white population. In 1857 manumission was completely outlawed in the state, and a year later a law was passed that forbade any meeting of slave or free persons without white supervision, a restriction which the African Methodist Episcopal church subsequently challenged. In response, the state's highest Court ruled that the African race was not subject to the same Constitutional principles that safeguarded whites.[3] This shift in official opinion signaled that the prevailing American ideology had at last won out in the state. As the Court had held less than a decade prior, *gens de couleur* were exceptional; however, what that meant had definitively shifted from an indication of privilege to a point of derision. People of color had become, as Carter G. Woodson described, "an exception to the natural plan of things" – their status had come to be "fixed as that of an inferior." The foreclosure of *libres*' conceptual space within this society presaged the contracting sphere of action for this community. Once the meaning of racial difference began to shift, law and practice quickly followed.

By 1860 the community of color had grown to almost 19,000 inhabitants. However, the

[2] An Act prescribing the rules and conduct to be observed with respect to Negroes and other Slaves in this territory, approved June 7, 1806, 40. Sec. XL, in Bullard and Curry, *Statute Laws*, 57.
[3] *African Methodist Episcopal Church v. The City of New Orleans*, in Finkelman, *Religion*, 5; Bell, *Revolution*, 84.

white community had grown at a far greater pace, placing *libres* at less than 5% of the free population.[4] This demographic adjustment precipitated a significant shift away from French cultural and civil structures. By 1860, the number of French born inhabitants was nearly doubled by the over 28,000 residents from Ireland alone. Like newcomers from other parts of the United States, Irish immigrants in particular arrived with racially justified notions of social and economic hierarchy. In addressing the condition of free blacks in the United States contemporary James Freeman Clark stated of such newcomers that "If they are freshly imported Irish patriots, who have bawled themselves hoarse for liberty at home, they instantly express their contempt for the colored man's rights, and their desire for an Alabama plantation stocked with fat negroes."[5] Jean Boze confirmed this inconsistency when he noted Irish workers' hostility toward craftsmen of color: "The Irish en masse are revolting against the mayor and other authorities with the pretense of being preferentially employed over the class of *gens de couleur libres* and slaves for all positons as mechanics, cartmen, etc…." As whites from outside of the region increasingly imported a racially determined social structure, craftsmen of color found themselves in a losing battle for skilled work.[6] Racial predetermination increasingly worked to circumscribe *libres*' financial independence.

In addition to its foreign born population, in 1860 roughly 22% of Louisiana's population

[4] Secretary of the Interior, *Statistics of the United States… in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns and being the Final Exhibit of the Eighth Census* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1866), 196. There were 18,647 *gens de couleur libres* in a total free population of 376,276 (4.96% *libres*)

[5] Ibid., James Freeman Clark, "The Free Colored People of the United States," in *The Free people of color* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 248.

[6] "les irlandais en masse se sont révolter contra la mairie et les autres autorités avec la prétention d'êtres employés de préférence a la classe de gens de couleur libres et l'esclaves pour tous les états mécaniques, charrettes &c &c…" Boze, 258.4, 1835; Bell, *Revolution*, 80. Bell holds that *libres* were almost completely replaced in the skilled trades by European immigrants by the 1840s, which is difficult to substantiate from existing records. Certainly, evidence shows that white workers, particularly the Irish, were agitating for preference over blacks, but it is unclear when the labor market began to shift in their favor. The 1850 census was the first to designate occupation by race, leaving us without a commensurate prior number by which to measure a change in condition.

hailed from outside the state, neighboring Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi contributing significantly to that number. Under this influence Louisiana's fluid social structure gave way to a more fixed racial "totalitarianism" which elevated race as the ultimate determinant of an individual's value and opportunity.[7] Consequently, the community of color became hemmed in by an unyielding narrative of racial absolutism. As one white inhabitant editorialized in 1866, "mulattoes and even negroes, may be taught to read Latin, to make speeches, to preach, to take part in public debates, &c., but placed under circumstances of great difficulty and trial, the uneducated but naturally superior Irishman, or German, would thrust them aside like chaff." The more lived experience contradicted such claims, the more earnestly did whites work to make their beliefs manifest in everyday experience. According to same commentator it would be "a great social crime to educate negroes and mulattoes, so long as a single man or woman of our own race was left in ignorance."[8] Just as favorable estimation of the regions' *gen de couleur libres* had determined a relatively liberal realm of opportunity, so too did the foregrounding of the community of color's purported inferiority lead white inhabitants to increasingly circumscribe such opportunity.

The local ruling bodies had already come to agree with the above resident's sentiments, and their actions proved detrimental to the community of color's educational endeavors. In 1858 student A.F. Frilot used his letterbook exercise to express his school's recent plight: "The Catholic Institution, to which I belong, has increased its price." Frilot confided to his imagined recipient, "You know yourself, my dear brother, that the prejudice against the colored population is very strong in this part of the country. The legislature used to give every year, for this establishment,

[7] *Eighth Census*, 196. Hirsch and Logsdon hold that "In an age of racial totalitarianism, the rapid assimilation of white immigrants and fierce determination of white creoles to link their identity with biological rather than a cultural heritage sharply demonstrated how Americanized white New Orleans had become," *Creole*, 190.
[8] "Mulatto Ability," *Louisiana Democrat*, October 10, 1866.

fifteen hundred dollars; but this year, when they went to get it, they did not want to give anything at all, and treated them very bad." In a missive dated the following day, classmate Leon Dupart repeated the circumstance, specifying that orphans would continue to attend for free but those with living parents would be charged $1.50 for six months of schooling. Dupart relayed, "I know many boys whose mothers say that they are going to take them out of school, because they say they take too dear."[9] The loss of government support and increased tuition did not affect students from families of means, nor even the few students who were quietly accepted into the common schools; however, those students were in the minority.[10] The Couvent School provided less affluent students of color the means to receive an education commensurate with wealthier families and white students receiving public schooling. The withdrawal of support that was freely granted institutions serving white students imperiled the future prospects of the community's foremost educational pillar.[11] Couvent School students' writings revealed them to be imaginative and capable young scholars regardless of material circumstance; however, the reduction in financial support made it far more difficult for many of the poorest students of this caste to receive instruction that would aid them in contradicting claims of their intellectual inferiority.

*Libres*' aspirations were definitively at odds with white inhabitants' need for ideological and material dominance. Little believing in their own inferiority free people of color imagined the future of the community not on the middling ground which they held but on equal footing with whites. Highlighting his belief that equal standing belonged not merely to elite *libres* but to all, Couvent School director Armand Lanusse poetically opined that "Riches, pride, are nothing but

[9] A.F. Frilot to L. Armstrong, May 27th, 1858; L. Dupart to Wm Green, May 28th, 1858, Letterbook, AANO.
[10] "In New Orleans before the reactionary period free persons of color did not find it difficult to use whatever educational facilities the city afforded. White teachers had no objection to having them as pupils," Rousseve, *Negro in Louisiana*, 42.
[11] As in many other communities, *gens de couleur* were not exempt from paying the taxes that went to the support of segregated public schools from which they were largely ban.

chimera; Children of the same God, all mortals are brothers."[12] Students likewise understood their social position and were no less eager for such equality than the community's adults. In 1862 young L. Lamanière shared his pleasure with the Union occupation, holding that he thought General Butler was going to grant the free-born men of color the vote. Lamanière held that "if he do that the colored men will be very glad to see equality reign here." That Couvent School pupils were so well informed was unlikely coincidental. Armand Lanusse was not the only school leader who actively spoke out against increasing racial degradation. Foreign language teacher Paul Trévigne also worked as the editor in chief for *L'Union*. In an editorial on race prejudice Trévigne questioned the inherent contradiction in the Federal Government's cries of liberty while continuing to legitimate second class citizenship for people of color: "What! You deprive men of color of any participation in the benefits of a democratic and *free* government under the futile pretext that they are descended from a race that your laws have degraded?"[13] Such a fiery defense of universal justice and of the equality of all men was not something to be left at the schoolhouse door. Clearly, educators of color brought current social and political concerns into the classroom. Continuing his letter, Lamanière wrote with youthful satisfaction that, "the creoles of this city will die when they see the negroes vote as well as them, those negroes whom they were always whipping in the plantations take their tickets and put it in the box."[14] Notably, this pupil's outlook bound all men of color, free and soon to be freed, in common aspiration. As such, these actors saw themselves not from the position of the essentialized inferior, but instead as agents who could define their own aims and place within the larger society.

Their fate suddenly bound to that of the mass of newly emancipated slaves, this caste

[12] *Creole voices; Poems in French by Free Men of Color*, Edited by Edward Maceo Coleman (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, Inc., 1845; Reprint 1945).
[13] Tinker, *Les Ecrits*, 475; quoted in Bell, *Revolution*, 224.
[14] Nov. 26th, 1862, Letterbook, AANO.

would either succeed or fail with their freed counterparts. For a brief moment *gens de couleur* saw the opportunity to not only stem the inhibiting pre-war tide, but in Reconstruction they saw their opportunity to realize the equality they desired. During Reconstruction 210 men of color held some form of governmental office in the state – at least 81 of those men were officially recognized as free prior to emancipation.[15] Instead of asserting a presumed superiority over the newly emancipated, these men showed their leadership in working for the benefit of all people of color. Indeed, education was one realm in which black leadership produced substantial gains; W.E.B. Du Bois went so far as to deem the "increase of knowledge" for people of color as the crowning accomplishment of Reconstruction. James D. Anderson likewise held that people of color "played a central role in etching the idea of universal public education into southern state constitutional law." According to Anderson, "Black politicians played a critical role in establishing universal education as a basic right in southern constitutional conventions during congressional Reconstruction."[16] This was particularly true in Louisiana; by 1864 the Louisiana Board of Education was already operating 95 schools for people of color. These schools served 9,571 children, 2,000 adults, and employed 162 teachers. By 1865, when the Freedmen's Bureau took over, numbers had grown to 126 schools and 19,000 students. Anderson appropriately stresses that, "such historical evidence has been wrongly used to attribute the freedmen's school system movement to Yankee benevolence or federal largesse."[17] In fact, Federal and philanthropic efforts would have been for naught had Louisiana's community of color, free and freed, proved as listless as popular opinion held.

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[15] Eric Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993; reprint 1996), xiv, xviii. Of the 93 whose prior status was unknown it is possible that many lived and were educated as free.
[16] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in American 1860-1880*, ed. David L. Levering Lewis (Reprint; 1935, New York: The Free Press, 1998), 637, 651; Anderson, *Education of Blacks*, 19.
[17] Anderson, *Education of Blacks*, 9.

Yet, even as the short-lived enfranchisement of blacks promised *gens de couleur* the inclusion for which they had always hoped, emancipation meant the revocation of their privileged status. It became increasingly apparent just how disparate were the community of color's vision of equality and white expectations. Instead of reconciling this dissonance, black liberation exacerbated it. The advancement of Louisiana's community of color required two things: first, continuation of mechanisms, such as equal civil protection, that could in turn facilitate economic, educational, and occupational independence. Second, they needed the conceptual forbearance that portrayed them as "dignified and worthy," which had previously enabled them to take liberal advantage of the foregoing mechanisms.[18] Instead, the removal of slavery's assurance of white superiority eliminated *libres*' privileged status. All people of color were, hence, flattened into one essentialized whole. Although white Louisianans had once characterized the region's community of color by its most accomplished, the end of slavery facilitated whites' equating all people of color with the most degraded of the newly freed masses. Thus, even as many rose up to push for equality, a number of families who were financially able opted to emulate their Saint-Dominguan counterparts and emigrate to less hostile environments such as parts of the Caribbean, Mexico, and France. After having studied in Paris, intellectuals and artists such as Norbert Rillieux, Victor Séjour, Eugene Warbourg, and Edmond Dédé found they could no longer abide the increasingly stifling atmosphere of their home and left permanently for Europe. Lucien Mansion helped to finance the evacuation of families harassed by marauding whites in Attakapas and Lafayette parishes in the late 1850s, and prominent community member Joseph Rousseau resettled in Haiti just before the war.[19]

[18] Gayarré, quoted in Grace King, *New Orleans*, 345.
[19] Bell, *Revolution*, 85-86; Desdunes, *Nos Hommes*, 81, 112; Hirsch and Logsdon, *Creole*, 81.

The foreclosure of opportunity wrought by increasing racial hostility toward people of color reveals just how essential the official recognition of people of color as "enlightened by education" was to the latitude granted them. Respectability was no longer gratuitously granted; it was the community of color's duty to earn whites' respect. Determining that blacks were better served in slavery than in freedom, in 1878 one white Louisianan explained that the Negro "has been told that he is superior to the white man, and only needs an education to entitle him to a seat in the white man's parlor.... He has been told that all of the fortunes of the South would be taxed to give him an education." He pointed out the evident fallacy in this course; "Soon the negro, under his new status, was deep in poverty and on the verge of starvation."[20] Although the author's argument was colored by his desire to establish blacks' dependence on, and need for, white supervision, his statement of the outcomes was apt. Education alone was insufficient because, as Ronald Butchart contends, "schools, reflecting the ideological system they supported, shifted responsibility for change entirely onto the Afro-Americans and then left them without the tools needed to facilitate change."[21] Insofar as people of color were not viewed as worthy independent citizens they were not granted the civil protections and economic opportunities that would have enabled them to achieve what they were told was, for them, unachievable. So long as they were denied opportunities across these points of contact with larger society, they would come up wanting, thus validating the degradation attributed them.[22]

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[20] J.M.P. Hickerson et. al, "The Negroes of Louisiana: Status, Habits and Superstitions of 'Louisiana Negroes,'" August 28, 1878, *Claiborne Guardian*.

[21] Ronald E. Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen's Education, 1862-1875*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press,1980), 201.207.

[22] Ushering in an era of de jure Jim Crow segregation the *Plessy* decision illustrates just how fundamental beliefs about racial difference were to civil protection and material outcomes for nation's people of color. In 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decisively reversed the Court's previous favorable estimation of people of color. While dismissing the essential connection between ideology and action, the Court unwittingly hit upon the importance of viewing people of color as a valued part of the social fabric: "If the two races are to meet upon terms of social equality, it must be the result of natural affinities, a mutual appreciation of each other's merits, and a voluntary consent of individuals."[22] Even as the Court refused to acknowledge that even if the government could not force such affinities, it was

If, then, we are to understand the educational attainment of free persons of color we must recognize that antebellum Louisiana, and New Orleans in particular, provided a space in which *libres* across financial circumstance had opportunities to obtain literacy, training in skilled trades, and the ability to practice those trades. This space was made possible and cultivated by the convergence of social attitudes that esteemed *gens de couleur libres* as respectable contributors to the larger community, and civil codes treating them as such. Although *libres*' earliest opportunities were granted with the aid of whites, the white community's acceptance of a literate and skilled community of color was far more instrumental to their educational attainment than the assistance itself. Such forbearance enabled persons of color to openly attend schools throughout the state, to express their knowledge through the arts and skilled occupations, and to open up educational opportunity for a greater portion of the community. This forbearance was evidenced not only by social fluidity, but by civil codes that both asserted particular rights and enabled others by omission. For instance, under Spanish rule civil codes worked to ease the path to freedom for many enslaved inhabitants, while regulations, which in other regions inhibited free blacks from protecting their property and stated rights, were conspicuously absent. In antebellum Louisiana free people of color were not prohibited

complicit in fostering inequality by legitimizing difference and division. Under such circumstances the two races had little opportunity to cultivate mutual appreciation, and diminishing incentive to voluntarily do so. The Federal Supreme Court held: "If [the plaintiff] be a white man, and assigned to a colored coach, he may have his action for damages against the company for being deprived of his so-called 'property.' Upon the other hand, if he be a colored man, and be so assigned, he has been deprived of no property, since he is not lawfully entitled to the reputation of being a white man." The Court concluded that "If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them upon the same plane." By this reasoning the assumed social inferiority of all people of color was realized in a system of laws that sanctioned materially different schools and other public facilities for people of color, and thus resulted in visibly different circumstances for communities of color. In a devastating conceptual reversal, the need to render black subordination evident worked to solidify *libres'* conceptual and material position at the bottom of society. In circumscribing the conceptual space that people of color occupied within this society, white inhabitants likewise circumscribed this caste's ability to proactively improve their situation. *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, Judgement, Decided May 18, 1896; Records of the Supreme Court of the United States; Record Group 267; *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163, #15248, National Archives.

from contracting with whites, they were not barred from testifying against whites in either civil or criminal complaints, nor was it illegal for them to establish or attend schools. While from the colony's inception those of African ancestry were considered to be a degraded class, their degradation was tempered within this liberated space.

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We remain separated from Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* by a relatively small passage of time in the larger scheme of history. This community was forged out of circumstances and social attitudes that created a circumstance quite different from that experienced by free blacks across the United States, during this period and since. It is surprising that *libres* could achieve as they did amid a context permeated by their presumed inferiority. So much so that, even today, we struggle to disentangle their achievement from the conceptual dichotomy of white superiority and black inferiority – achievement equated with whiteness, and deficiency with blackness. Within such a frame of understanding the achievements of Louisiana's community of color represent mimicry instead of inspiration. From outside of such an opposition, however, this community's achievements can be seen as remarkable due to the historical context, not to their race. What is exceptional about the attainments of Louisiana's community of color was not that it was a community of color, but that, as a community of color, they were granted the space to liberally pursue their aspirations.

Therefore, it is important to reckon with how accustomed beliefs about people of color have shaped our understanding about the educational achievement of people of color. It is necessary to recognize the struggles and sacrifices of the innumerable people of color who, over hundreds of years, strived for education against a gale of paternalistic subversion and outright obstruction. At the same time, we should also be careful not to treat blacks' educational trials as

evidence of a foregone conclusion. Instead, the difficult task is to understand black communities' aspirations, achievements, and failures without, as DuBois describes, measuring them "by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." That is, to understand Louisiana's community of color as something other than a problem that was for a short time resolved.[23] Regarded in this way, the educational story of Louisiana's *libres* caste is not an exceptional case, but a significant counterpoint against which to consider the educational circumstances of other black communities. This story is only anomalous if we operate from within conceptual parameters that hold blackness to be, as Woodson held, "fixed as that of an inferior."[24] If we expand our conceptual boundaries, however, we see that the high educational attainment of Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* is merely thesis to this antithesis – the attainment that must exist as counterpoint to failure. This community was exceptional due to the alternate meaning that was, for a time, placed upon their perceived difference. They succeeded not because they were different from other antebellum free people of color, but because they were treated differently.

[23] William E.B. DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*, in *Three Negro Classics* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 215.
[24] "New Orleans may be seen not as an exceptional case to be ignored but as a significant counterpoint against which to measure the rest of deviant North America," Hirsch and Logsdon, *Creole*, 189; Woodson, *Mis-education*, 19.

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Appendix A

**Conversion of Monetary Value Based on Inflation, 1850 to 2014**

**Source:** The Bureau of Labor Statistic's annual Consumer Price Index (CPI): http://www.in2013dollars.com/1850-dollars-in-2014?amount

| 1850 | 2014 |
|---|---|
| $200.00 | $5,829.00 |
| $400.00 | $11,658.00 |
| $600.00 | $17,486.99 |
| $800.00 | $23,315.99 |
| $1,000.00 | $29,144.99 |
| $2,000.00 | $58,289.98 |
| $3,000.00 | $87,434.97 |
| $4,000.00 | $116,579.95 |
| $5,000.00 | $145,724.94 |
| $6,000.00 | $174,869.93 |
| $7,000.00 | $204,014.92 |
| $8,000.00 | $233,159.91 |
| $9,000.00 | $262,304.90 |
| $10,000.00 | $291,449.89 |
| $15,000.00 | $437,174.83 |
| $20,000.00 | $582,899.77 |
| $25,000.00 | $728,624.72 |
| $30,000.00 | $874,349.66 |
| $35,000.00 | $1,020,074.61 |
| $50,000.00 | $1,457,249.44 |
| $100,000.00 | $2,914,498.87 |
| $150,000.00 | $4,371,748.31 |
| $250,000.00 | $7,286,247.18 |
| $400,000.00 | $11,657,995.49 |
| $2,200,000.00 | $64,118,975.22 |

Appendix B

**Locations of Schools Known to have taught *libres***
**Students in Antebellum Louisiana**